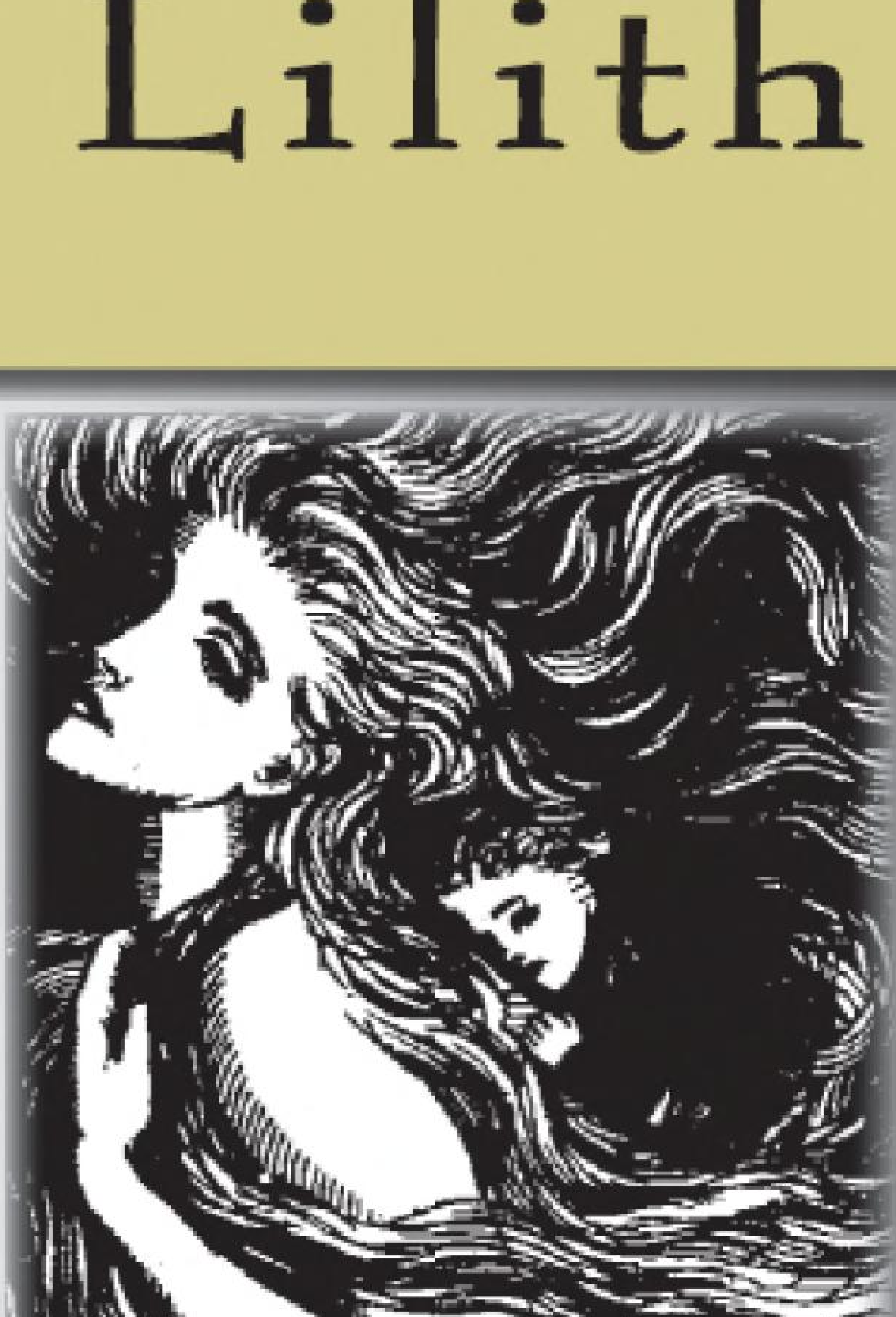
Lilith



George MacDonald

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CHAPTER I

THE LIBRARY

I had just finished my studies at Oxford, and was taking a brief holiday from work before assuming definitely the management of the estate. My father died when I was yet a child; my mother followed him within a year; and I was nearly as much alone in the world as a man might find himself.

I had made little acquaintance with the history of my ancestors. Almost the only thing I knew concerning them was, that a notable number of them had been given to study. I had myself so far inherited the tendency as to devote a good deal of my time, though, I confess, after a somewhat desultory fashion, to the physical sciences. It was chiefly the wonder they woke that drew me. I was constantly seeing, and on the outlook to see, strange analogies, not only between the facts of different sciences of the same order, or between physical and metaphysical facts, but between physical hypotheses and suggestions glimmering out of the metaphysical dreams into which I was in the habit of falling. I was at the same time much given to a premature indulgence of the impulse to turn hypothesis into theory. Of my mental peculiarities there is no occasion to say more.

The house as well as the family was of some antiquity, but no description of it is necessary to the understanding of my narrative. It

man the transitory nature of possession than his ancient property! Like a moving panorama mine has re many eyes, and is now slowly flitting from before

ough duly considered in many alterations of the house it, had nevertheless, like an encroaching state, m after another until it occupied the greater part of the chief room was large, and the walls of it were covered st to the ceiling; the rooms into which it overflowed

impress upon a succeeding to an passed from befo my own.

The library, alth and additions to absorbed one roo ground floor. Its with books almo were of various sizes and shapes, and communicated in modes as various--by doors, by open arches, by short passages, by steps up and steps down.

In the great room I mainly spent my time, reading books of science, old as well as new; for the history of the human mind in relation to supposed knowledge was what most of all interested me. Ptolemy, Dante, the two Bacons, and Boyle were even more to me than Darwin or Maxwell, as so much nearer the vanished van breaking into the dark of ignorance.

In the evening of a gloomy day of August I was sitting in my usual place, my back to one of the windows, reading. It had rained the greater part of the morning and afternoon, but just as the sun was setting, the clouds parted in front of him, and he shone into the room. I rose and looked out of the window. In the centre of the great lawn the feathering top of the fountain column was filled with his red glory. I turned to resume my seat, when my eye was caught by the same glory on the one picture in the room--a portrait, in a sort of niche or little shrine sunk for it in the expanse of book-filled shelves. I knew it as the likeness of one of my ancestors, but had never even wondered why it hung there alone, and not in the gallery, or one of the great rooms, among the other family portraits. The direct sunlight brought out the painting wonderfully; for the first time I seemed to see it, and for the first time it seemed to respond to my look. With my eyes full of the light reflected from it, something, I cannot tell what, made me turn and cast a glance to the farther end of the room, when I saw, or seemed to see, a tall figure reaching up a hand to a bookshelf. The next instant, my vision apparently rectified by the comparative dusk, I saw no one, and concluded that my optic nerves had been momentarily affected from within.

I resumed my reading, and would doubtless have forgotten the vague, evanescent impression, had it not been that, having occasion a moment after to consult a certain volume, I found but a gap in the row where it ought to have stood, and the same instant remembered that just there I had seen, or fancied I saw, the old man in search of a book. I looked all about the spot but in vain. The next morning, however, there it was, just where I had thought to find it! I knew of no one in the house likely to be interested in such a book.

Three days after, another and yet odder thing took place.

In one of the walls was the low, narrow door of a closet, containing some of the oldest and rarest of the books. It was a very thick door, with a projecting frame, and it had been the fancy of some ancestor to cross it with shallow shelves, filled with book-backs only. The harmless trick may be excused by the fact that the titles on the sham backs were either humorously original, or those of books lost beyond hope of recovery. I had a great liking for the masked door.

To complete the illusion of it, some inventive workman apparently had shoved in, on the top of one of the rows, a part of a volume thin enough to lie between it and the bottom of the next shelf: he had cut away diagonally a considerable portion, and fixed the remnant with one of its open corners projecting beyond the book-backs. The binding of the mutilated volume was limp vellum, and one could open the corner far enough to see that it was manuscript upon parchment.

Happening, as I sat reading, to raise my eyes from the page, my glance fell upon this door, and at once I saw that the book described, if book it may be called, was gone. Angrier than any worth I knew in it justified, I rang the bell, and the butler appeared. When I asked him if he knew what had befallen it, he turned pale, and assured me he did not. I could less easily doubt his word than my own eyes, for he had been all his life in the family, and a more faithful servant never lived. He left on me the impression, nevertheless, that he could have said something more.

In the afternoon I was again reading in the library, and coming to a point which demanded reflection, I lowered the book and let my eyes go wandering. The same moment I saw the back of a slender old man, in a long, dark coat, shiny as from much wear, in the act of disappearing through the masked door into the closet beyond. I darted across the room, found the door shut, pulled it open, looked into the closet, which had no other issue, and, seeing nobody, concluded, not without uneasiness, that I had had a recurrence of my former illusion, and sat down again to my reading.

Naturally, however, I could not help feeling a little nervous, and presently glancing up to assure myself that I was indeed alone, started again to my feet, and ran to the masked door--for there was the mutilated volume in its place! I laid hold of it and pulled: it was firmly fixed as usual!

I was now utterly bewildered. I rang the bell; the butler came; I told him all I had seen, and he told me all he knew.

He had hoped, he said, that the old gentleman was going to be forgotten; it was well no one but myself had seen him. He had heard a good deal about him when first he served in the house, but by degrees

I questioned him as to what he had seen of the old gentleman.

He had never seen him, he said, although he had been in the house from the day my father was eight years old. My grandfather would never hear a word on the matter, declaring that whoever alluded to it should be dismissed without a moment's warning: it was nothing but a pretext of the maids, he said, for running into the arms of the men! but old Sir Ralph believed in nothing he could not see or lay hold of. Not one of the maids ever said she had seen the apparition, but a footman had left the place because of it.

An ancient woman in the village had told him a legend concerning a Mr. Raven, long time librarian to "that Sir Upward whose portrait hangs there among the books." Sir Upward was a great reader, she said--not of such books only as were wholesome for men to read, but of strange, forbidden, and evil books; and in so doing, Mr. Raven, who was probably the devil himself, encouraged him. Suddenly they both disappeared, and Sir Upward was never after seen or heard of, but Mr. Raven continued to show himself at uncertain intervals in the library. There were some who believed he was not dead; but both he and the old woman held it easier to believe that a dead man might revisit the world he had left, than that one who went on living for hundreds of years should be a man at all.

He had never heard that Mr. Raven meddled with anything in the house, but he might perhaps consider himself privileged in regard to the books. How the old woman had learned so much about him he could not tell; but the description she gave of him corresponded exactly with the figure I had just seen.

"I hope it was but a friendly call on the part of the old gentleman!" he concluded, with a troubled smile.

I told him I had no objection to any number of visits from Mr. Raven, but it would be well he should keep to his resolution of saying nothing about him to the servants. Then I asked him if he had ever seen the mutilated volume out of its place; he answered that he never had, and had always thought it a fixture. With that he went to it, and gave it a pull: it seemed immovable.

CHAPTER II

THE MIRROR

Nothing more happened for some days. I think it was about a week after, when what I have now to tell took place.

I had often thought of the manuscript fragment, and repeatedly tried to discover some way of releasing it, but in vain: I could not find out what held it fast.

But I had for some time intended a thorough overhauling of the books in the closet, its atmosphere causing me uneasiness as to their condition. One day the intention suddenly became a resolve, and I was in the act of rising from my chair to make a beginning, when I saw the old librarian moving from the door of the closet toward the farther end of the room. I ought rather to say only that I caught sight of something shadowy from which I received the impression of a slight, stooping man, in a shabby dress-coat reaching almost to his heels, the tails of which, disparting a little as he walked, revealed thin legs in black stockings, and large feet in wide, slipper-like shoes.

At once I followed him: I might be following a shadow, but I never doubted I was following something. He went out of the library into the hall, and across to the foot of the great staircase, then up the stairs to the first floor, where lay the chief rooms. Past these rooms, I following close, he continued his way, through a wide corridor, to the foot of a narrower stair leading to the second floor. Up that he went also, and when I reached the top, strange as it may seem, I found myself in a region almost unknown to me. I never had brother or sister to incite to such romps as make children familiar with nook and cranny; I was a mere child when my guardian took me away; and I had never seen the house again until, about a month before, I returned to take possession.

Through passage after passage we came to a door at the bottom of a winding wooden stair, which we ascended. Every step creaked under my foot, but I heard no sound from that of my guide. Somewhere in the middle of the stair I lost sight of him, and from the top of it the shadowy shape was nowhere visible. I could not even imagine I saw him. The place was full of shadows, but he was not one of them.

I was in the main garret, with huge beams and rafters over my head, great spaces around me, a door here and there in sight, and long vistas

[redacted]

CHAPTER III

THE RAVEN

I turned and looked behind me: all was vague and uncertain, as when one cannot distinguish between fog and field, between cloud and mountain-side. One fact only was plain--that I saw nothing I knew. Imagining myself involved in a visual illusion, and that touch would correct sight, I stretched my arms and felt about me, walking in this direction and that, if haply, where I could see nothing, I might yet come in contact with something; but my search was vain. Instinctively then, as to the only living thing near me, I turned to the raven, which stood a little way off, regarding me with an expression at once respectful and quizzical. Then the absurdity of seeking counsel from such a one struck me, and I turned again, overwhelmed with bewilderment, not unmingled with fear. Had I wandered into a region where both the material and psychical relations of our world had ceased to hold? Might a man at any moment step beyond the realm of order, and become the sport of the lawless? Yet I saw the raven, felt the ground under my feet, and heard a sound as of wind in the lowly plants around me!

"How DID I get here?" I said--apparently aloud, for the question was immediately answered.

"You came through the door," replied an odd, rather harsh voice.

I looked behind, then all about me, but saw no human shape. The terror that madness might be at hand laid hold upon me: must I henceforth place no confidence either in my senses or my consciousness? The same instant I knew it was the raven that had spoken, for he stood looking up at me with an air of waiting. The sun was not shining, yet the bird seemed to cast a shadow, and the shadow seemed part of himself.

I beg my reader to aid me in the endeavour to make myself intelligible--if here understanding be indeed possible between us. I was in a world, or call it a state of things, an economy of conditions, an idea of existence, so little correspondent with the ways and modes of this world--which we are apt to think the only world, that the best choice I can make of word or phrase is but an adumbration of what I would convey. I begin indeed to fear that I have undertaken an impossibility, undertaken to tell what I cannot tell because no speech at my command will fit the forms in my mind. Already I have set down statements I would gladly change did I know how to substitute a truer utterance; but as often as I try to fit the reality with nearer words, I find myself in danger of losing the things themselves, and feel like one in process of awaking from a dream, with the thing that seemed familiar gradually yet swiftly changing through a succession of forms until its very nature is no longer recognisable.

I bethought me that a bird capable of addressing a man must have the right of a man to a civil answer; perhaps, as a bird, even a greater claim.

A tendency to croak caused a certain roughness in his speech, but his voice was not disagreeable, and what he said, although conveying little enlightenment, did not sound rude.

"I did not come through any door," I rejoined.

"I saw you come through it!--saw you with my own ancient eyes!" asserted the raven, positively but not disrespectfully.

"I never saw any door!" I persisted.

"Of course not!" he returned; "all the doors you had yet seen--and you haven't seen many--were doors in; here you came upon a door out! The strange thing to you," he went on thoughtfully, "will be, that the more doors you go out of, the farther you get in!"

"Oblige me by telling me where I am."

"That is impossible. You know nothing about whereness. The only way to come to know where you are is to begin to make yourself at home."

"How am I to begin that where everything is so strange?"

"By doing something."

"What?"

"Anything; and the sooner you begin the better! for until you are at home, you will find it as difficult to get out as it is to get in."

"I have, unfortunately, found it too easy to get in; once out I shall not try again!"

"You have stumbled in, and may, possibly, stumble out again. Whether you have got in UNFORTUNATELY remains to be seen."

"Do you never go out, sir?"

"When I please I do, but not often, or for long. Your world is such a half-baked sort of place, it is at once so childish and so self-satisfied--in fact, it is not sufficiently developed for an old raven--at your service!"

"Am I wrong, then, in presuming that a man is superior to a bird?"

"That is as it may be. We do not waste our intellects in generalising, but take man or bird as we find him.--I think it is now my turn to ask you a question!"

"You have the best of rights," I replied, "in the fact that you CAN do so!"

"Well answered!" he rejoined. "Tell me, then, who you are--if you happen to know."

"How should I help knowing? I am myself, and must know!"

"If you know you are yourself, you know that you are not somebody else; but do you know that you are yourself? Are you sure you are not your own father?--or, excuse me, your own fool?--Who are you, pray?"

I became at once aware that I could give him no notion of who I was. Indeed, who was I? It would be no answer to say I was who! Then I understood that I did not know myself, did not know what I was, had no grounds on which to determine that I was one and not another. As for the name I went by in my own world, I had forgotten it, and did not care to recall it, for it meant nothing, and what it might be was plainly of no consequence here. I had indeed almost forgotten that there it was a custom for everybody to have a name! So I held my peace, and it was my wisdom; for what should I say to a creature such as this raven, who saw through accident into entity?

"Look at me," he said, "and tell me who I am."

As he spoke, he turned his back, and instantly I knew him. He was no longer a raven, but a man above the middle height with a stoop, very thin, and wearing a long black tail-coat. Again he turned, and I saw him a raven.

"I have seen you before, sir," I said, feeling foolish rather than surprised.

"How can you say so from seeing me behind?" he rejoined. "Did you ever see yourself behind? You have never seen yourself at all! --Tell me now, then, who I am."

"I humbly beg your pardon," I answered: "I believe you were once the librarian of our house, but more WHO I do not know."

"Why do you beg my pardon?"

"Because I took you for a raven," I said--seeing him before me as plainly a raven as bird or man could look.

"You did me no wrong," he returned. "Calling me a raven, or thinking me one, you allowed me existence, which is the sum of what one can demand of his fellow-beings. Therefore, in return, I will give you a lesson:--No one can say he is himself, until first he knows that he IS, and then what HIMSELF is. In fact, nobody is himself, and himself is nobody. There is more in it than you can see now, but not more than you need to see. You have, I fear, got into this region too soon, but none the less you must get to be at home in it; for home, as you may or may not know, is the only place where you can go out and in. There are places you can go into, and places you can go out of; but the one place, if you do but find it, where you may go out and in both, is home."

He turned to walk away, and again I saw the librarian. He did not appear to have changed, only to have taken up his shadow. I know this seems nonsense, but I cannot help it.

I gazed after him until I saw him no more; but whether distance hid him, or he disappeared among the heather, I cannot tell.

Could it be that I was dead, I thought, and did not know it? Was I in what we used to call the world beyond the grave? and must I wander about seeking my place in it? How was I to find myself at home? The raven said I must do something: what could I do here?-- And would that make me somebody? for now, alas, I was nobody!

I took the way Mr. Raven had gone, and went slowly after him. Presently I saw a wood of tall slender pine-trees, and turned toward it. The odour of it met me on my way, and I made haste to bury myself in it.

Plunged at length in its twilight glooms, I spied before me something with a shine, standing between two of the stems. It had no colour, but was like the translucent trembling of the hot air that rises, in a radiant summer noon, from the sun-baked ground, vibrant like the smitten chords of a musical instrument. What it was grew no plainer as I went nearer, and when I came close up, I ceased to see it, only the form and colour of the trees beyond seemed strangely uncertain. I would have passed between the stems, but received a slight shock, stumbled, and fell. When I rose, I saw before me the wooden wall of the garret chamber. I turned, and there was the mirror, on whose top the black eagle seemed but that moment to have perched.

Terror seized me, and I fled. Outside the chamber the wide garret spaces had an UNCANNY look. They seemed to have long been waiting for something; it had come, and they were waiting again! A shudder went through me on the winding stair: the house had grown strange to me! something was about to leap upon me from behind! I darted down the spiral, struck against the wall and fell, rose and ran. On the next floor I lost my way, and had gone through several passages a second time ere I found the head of the stair. At the top of the great stair I had come to myself a little, and in a few moments I sat recovering my breath in the library the phrases, some of the senseless half-lines, some even of the individual words affected me in similar fashion--as with the aroma of an idea, rousing in me a great longing to know what the poem or poems might, even yet in their mutilation, hold or suggest.

I copied out a few of the larger shreds attainable, and tried hard to complete some of the lines, but without the least success. The only thing I gained in the effort was so much weariness that, when I went to bed, I fell asleep at once and slept soundly.

In the morning all that horror of the empty garret spaces had left me.

CHAPTER IV

SOMEWHERE OR NOWHERE?

The sun was very bright, but I doubted if the day would long be fine, and looked into the milky sapphire I wore, to see whether the star in it was clear. It was even less defined than I had expected. I rose from the breakfast-table, and went to the window to glance at the stone again. There had been heavy rain in the night, and on the lawn was a thrush breaking his way into the shell of a snail.

As I was turning my ring about to catch the response of the star to the sun, I spied a keen black eye gazing at me out of the milky misty blue. The sight startled me so that I dropped the ring, and when I picked it up the eye was gone from it. The same moment the sun was obscured; a dark vapour covered him, and in a minute or two the whole sky was clouded. The air had grown sultry, and a gust of wind came suddenly. A moment more and there was a flash of lightning, with a single sharp thunder-clap. Then the rain fell in torrents.

I had opened the window, and stood there looking out at the precipitous rain, when I descried a raven walking toward me over the grass, with solemn gait, and utter disregard of the falling deluge. Suspecting who he was, I congratulated myself that I was safe on the ground-floor. At the same time I had a conviction that, if I were not careful, something would happen.

He came nearer and nearer, made a profound bow, and with a sudden winged leap stood on the window-sill. Then he stepped over the ledge, jumped down into the room, and walked to the door. I thought he was on his way to the library, and followed him, determined, if he went up the stair, not to take one step after him. He turned, however, neither toward the library nor the stair, but to a little door that gave upon a grass-patch in a nook between two portions of the rambling old house. I made haste to open it for him. He stepped out into its creeper-covered porch, and stood looking at the rain, which fell like a huge thin cataract; I stood in the door behind him. The second flash came, and was followed by a lengthened roll of more distant thunder. He turned his head over his shoulder and looked at me, as much as to say, "You hear that?" then swivelled it round again, and anew contemplated the weather, apparently with approbation. So human were his pose and carriage and the way he kept turning his head, that I remarked almost involuntarily,

"Fine weather for the worms, Mr. Raven!"

"Yes," he answered, in the rather croaky voice I had learned to know, "the ground will be nice for them to get out and in!--It must be a grand time on the steppes of Uranus!" he added, with a glance upward; "I believe it is raining there too; it was, all the last week!"

"Why should that make it a grand time?" I asked.

"Because the animals there are all burrowers," he answered, "--like the field-mice and the moles here.--They will be, for ages to come."

"How do you know that, if I may be so bold?" I rejoined.

"As any one would who had been there to see," he replied. "It is a great sight, until you get used to it, when the earth gives a heave, and out comes a beast. You might think it a hairy elephant or a deinotherium--but none of the animals are the same as we have ever had here. I was almost frightened myself the first time I saw the dry-bog-serpent come wallowing out--such a head and mane! and SUCH eyes!--but the shower is nearly over. It will stop directly after the next thunder-clap. There it is!"

A flash came with the words, and in about half a minute the thunder. Then the rain ceased.

"Now we should be going!" said the raven, and stepped to the front of the porch.

"Going where?" I asked.

"Going where we have to go," he answered. "You did not surely think you had got home? I told you there was no going out and in at pleasure until you were at home!"

"I do not want to go," I said.

"That does not make any difference--at least not much," he answered. "This is the way!"

"I am quite content where I am."

"You think so, but you are not. Come along."

He hopped from the porch onto the grass, and turned, waiting.

"I will not leave the house to-day," I said with obstinacy.

"You will come into the garden!" rejoined the raven.

"I give in so far," I replied, and stepped from the porch.

The sun broke through the clouds, and the raindrops flashed and sparkled on the grass. The raven was walking over it.

"You will wet your feet!" I cried.

"And mire my beak," he answered, immediately plunging it deep in the sod, and drawing out a great wriggling red worm. He threw back his head, and tossed it in the air. It spread great wings, gorgeous in red and black, and soared aloft.

"Tut! tut!" I exclaimed; "you mistake, Mr. Raven: worms are not the larvæ of butterflies!"

"Never mind," he croaked; "it will do for once! I'm not a reading man at present, but sexton at the--at a certain graveyard--cemetery, more properly--in--at--no matter where!"

"I see! you can't keep your spade still: and when you have nothing to bury, you must dig something up! Only you should mind what it is before you make it fly! No creature should be allowed to forget what and where it came from!"

"Why?" said the raven.

"Because it will grow proud, and cease to recognise its superiors."

No man knows it when he is making an idiot of himself.

"Where DO the worms come from?" said the raven, as if suddenly grown curious to know.

"Why, from the earth, as you have just seen!" I answered.

"Yes, last!" he replied. "But they can't have come from it first-- for that will never go back to it!" he added, looking up.

I looked up also, but could see nothing save a little dark cloud, the edges of which were red, as if with the light of the sunset.

"Surely the sun is not going down!" I exclaimed, struck with amazement.

"Oh, no!" returned the raven. "That red belongs to the worm."

"You see what comes of making creatures forget their origin!" I cried with some warmth.

"It is well, surely, if it be to rise higher and grow larger!" he returned. "But indeed I only teach them to find it!"

"Would you have the air full of worms?"

"That is the business of a sexton. If only the rest of the clergy understood it as well!"

In went his beak again through the soft turf, and out came the wriggling worm. He tossed it in the air, and away it flew.

I looked behind me, and gave a cry of dismay: I had but that moment declared I would not leave the house, and already I was a stranger in the strange land!

"What right have you to treat me so, Mr. Raven?" I said with deep offence. "Am I, or am I not, a free agent?"

"A man is as free as he chooses to make himself, never an atom freer," answered the raven.

"You have no right to make me do things against my will!"

"When you have a will, you will find that no one can."

"You wrong me in the very essence of my individuality!" I persisted.

"If you were an individual I could not, therefore now I do not. You are but beginning to become an individual."

All about me was a pine-forest, in which my eyes were already searching deep, in the hope of discovering an unaccountable glimmer, and so finding my way home. But, alas! how could I any longer call that house HOME, where every door, every window opened into OUT, and even the garden I could not keep inside!

I suppose I looked discomfited.

"Perhaps it may comfort you," said the raven, "to be told that you have not yet left your house, neither has your house left you. At the same time it cannot contain you, or you inhabit it!"

"I do not understand you," I replied. "Where am I?"

"In the region of the seven dimensions," he answered, with a curious noise in his throat, and a flutter of his tail. "You had better follow me carefully now for a moment, lest you should hurt some one!"

"There is nobody to hurt but yourself, Mr. Raven! I confess I should rather like to hurt you!"

"That you see nobody is where the danger lies. But you see that large tree to your left, about thirty yards away?"

"Of course I do: why should I not?" I answered testily.

"Ten minutes ago you did not see it, and now you do not know where it stands!"

"I do."

"Where do you think it stands?"

"Why THERE, where you know it is!"

"Where is THERE?"

"You bother me with your silly questions!" I cried. "I am growing tired of you!"

"That tree stands on the hearth of your kitchen, and grows nearly straight up its chimney," he said.

"Now I KNOW you are making game of me!" I answered, with a laugh of scorn.

"Was I making game of you when you discovered me looking out of your star-sapphire yesterday?"

"That was this morning--not an hour ago!"

"I have been widening your horizon longer than that, Mr. Vane; but never mind!"

"You mean you have been making a fool of me!" I said, turning from him.

"Excuse me: no one can do that but yourself!"

"And I decline to do it."

"You mistake."

"How?"

"In declining to acknowledge yourself one already. You make yourself such by refusing what is true, and for that you will sorely punish yourself."

"How, again?"

"By believing what is not true."

"Then, if I walk to the other side of that tree, I shall walk through the kitchen fire?"

"Certainly. You would first, however, walk through the lady at the piano in the breakfast-room. That rosebush is close by her. You would give her a terrible start!"

"There is no lady in the house!"

"Indeed! Is not your housekeeper a lady? She is counted such in a certain country where all are servants, and the liveries one and multitudinous!"

"She cannot use the piano, anyhow!"

"Her niece can: she is there--a well-educated girl and a capital musician."

"Excuse me; I cannot help it: you seem to me to be talking sheer nonsense!"

"If you could but hear the music! Those great long heads of wild hyacinth are inside the piano, among the strings of it, and give that peculiar sweetness to her playing!--Pardon me: I forgot your deafness!"

"Two objects," I said, "cannot exist in the same place at the same time!"

"Can they not? I did not know!--I remember now they do teach that with you. It is a great mistake--one of the greatest ever wiseacre made! No man of the universe, only a man of the world could have said so!"

"You a librarian, and talk such rubbish!" I cried. "Plainly, you did not read many of the books in your charge!"

"Oh, yes! I went through all in your library--at the time, and came out at the other side not much the wiser. I was a bookworm then, but when I came to know it, I woke among the butterflies. To be sure I have given up reading for a good many years--ever since I was made sexton.--There! I smell Grieg's Wedding March in the quiver of those rose-petals!"

I went to the rose-bush and listened hard, but could not hear the thinnest ghost of a sound; I only smelt something I had never before smelt in any rose. It was still rose-odour, but with a difference, caused, I suppose, by the Wedding March.

When I looked up, there was the bird by my side.

"Mr. Raven," I said, "forgive me for being so rude: I was irritated. Will you kindly show me my way home? I must go, for I have an appointment with my bailiff. One must not break faith with his servants!"

"You cannot break what was broken days ago!" he answered.

"Do show me the way," I pleaded.

"I cannot," he returned. "To go back, you must go through yourself, and that way no man can show another."

Entreaty was vain. I must accept my fate! But how was life to be lived in a world of which I had all the laws to learn? There would, however, be adventure! that held consolation; and whether I found my way home or not, I should at least have the rare advantage of knowing two worlds!

I had never yet done anything to justify my existence; my former world was nothing the better for my sojourn in it: here, however, I must earn, or in some way find, my bread! But I reasoned that, as I was not to blame in being here, I might expect to be taken care of here as well as there! I had had nothing to do with getting into the world I had just left, and in it I had found myself heir to a large property! If that world, as I now saw, had a claim upon me because I had eaten, and could eat again, upon this world I had a claim because I must eat--when it would in return have a claim on me!

"There is no hurry," said the raven, who stood regarding me; "we do not go much by the clock here. Still, the sooner one begins to do what has to be done, the better! I will take you to my wife."

"Thank you. Let us go!" I answered, and immediately he led the way.

CHAPTER V

THE OLD CHURCH

I followed him deep into the pine-forest. Neither of us said much while yet the sacred gloom of it closed us round. We came to larger and yet larger trees--older, and more individual, some of them grotesque with age. Then the forest grew thinner.

"You see that hawthorn?" said my guide at length, pointing with his beak.

I looked where the wood melted away on the edge of an open heath.

"I see a gnarled old man, with a great white head," I answered.

"Look again," he rejoined: "it is a hawthorn."

"It seems indeed an ancient hawthorn; but this is not the season for the hawthorn to blossom!" I objected.

"The season for the hawthorn to blossom," he replied, "is when the hawthorn blossoms. That tree is in the ruins of the church on your home-farm. You were going to give some directions to the bailiff about its churchyard, were you not, the morning of the thunder?"

"I was going to tell him I wanted it turned into a wilderness of rose-trees, and that the plough must never come within three yards of it."

"Listen!" said the raven, seeming to hold his breath.

I listened, and heard--was it the sighing of a far-off musical wind--or the ghost of a music that had once been glad? Or did I indeed hear anything?

"They go there still," said the raven.

"Who goes there? and where do they go?" I asked.

"Some of the people who used to pray there, go to the ruins still," he replied. "But they will not go much longer, I think."

CHAPTER VI

THE SEXTON'S COTTAGE

We had been for some time walking over a rocky moorland covered with dry plants and mosses, when I descried a little cottage in the farthest distance. The sun was not yet down, but he was wrapt in a gray cloud. The heath looked as if it had never been warm, and the wind blew strangely cold, as if from some region where it was always night.

"Here we are at last!" said the raven. "What a long way it is! In half the time I could have gone to Paradise and seen my cousin--him, you remember, who never came back to Noah! Dear! dear! it is almost winter!"

"Winter!" I cried; "it seems but half a day since we left home!"

"That is because we have travelled so fast," answered the raven. "In your world you cannot pull up the plumb-line you call gravitation, and let the world spin round under your feet! But here is my wife's house! She is very good to let me live with her, and call it the sexton's cottage!"

"But where is your churchyard--your cemetery--where you make your graves, I mean?" said I, seeing nothing but the flat heath.

The raven stretched his neck, held out his beak horizontally, turned it slowly round to all the points of the compass, and said nothing.

I followed the beak with my eyes, and lo, without church or graves, all was a churchyard! Wherever the dreary wind swept, there was the raven's cemetery! He was sexton of all he surveyed! lord of all that was laid aside! I stood in the burial-ground of the universe; its compass the unenclosed heath, its wall the gray horizon, low and starless! I had left spring and summer, autumn and sunshine behind me, and come to the winter that waited for me! I had set out in the prime of my youth, and here I was already!--But I mistook. The day might well be long in that region, for it contained the seasons. Winter slept there, the night through, in his winding-sheet of ice; with childlike smile, Spring came awake in the dawn; at noon, Summer blazed abroad in her gorgeous beauty; with the slow-changing afternoon, old Autumn crept in, and died at the first breath of the vaporous, ghosty night.

As we drew near the cottage, the clouded sun was rushing down the steepest slope of the west, and he sank while we were yet a few yards from the door. The same instant I was assailed by a cold that seemed almost a material presence, and I struggled across the threshold as if from the clutches of an icy death. A wind swelled up on the moor, and rushed at the door as with difficulty I closed it behind me. Then all was still, and I looked about me.

A candle burned on a deal table in the middle of the room, and the first thing I saw was the lid of a coffin, as I thought, set up against the wall; but it opened, for it was a door, and a woman entered. She was all in white--as white as new-fallen snow; and her face was as white as her dress, but not like snow, for at once it suggested warmth. I thought her features were perfect, but her eyes made me forget them. The life of her face and her whole person was gathered and concentrated in her eyes, where it became light. It might have been coming death that made her face luminous, but the eyes had life in them for a nation--large, and dark with a darkness ever deepening as I gazed. A whole night-heaven lay condensed in each pupil; all the stars were in its blackness, and flashed; while round it for a horizon lay coiled an iris of the eternal twilight. What any eye IS, God only knows: her eyes must have been coming direct out of his own! the still face might be a primeval perfection; the live eyes were a continuous creation.

"Here is Mr. Vane, wife!" said the raven.

"He is welcome," she answered, in a low, rich, gentle voice. Treasures of immortal sound seemed to he buried in it.

I gazed, and could not speak.

"I knew you would be glad to see him!" added the raven.

She stood in front of the door by which she had entered, and did not come nearer.

"Will he sleep?" she asked.

"I fear not," he replied; "he is neither weary nor heavy laden."

"Why then have you brought him?"

"I have my fears it may prove precipitate."

"I do not quite understand you," I said, with an uneasy foreboding as to what she meant, but a vague hope of some escape. "Surely a man must do a day's work first!"

I gazed into the white face of the woman, and my heart fluttered. She returned my gaze in silence.

"Let me first go home," I resumed, "and come again after I have found or made, invented, or at least discovered something!"

"He has not yet learned that the day begins with sleep!" said the woman, turning to her husband. "Tell him he must rest before he can do anything!"

"Men," he answered, "think so much of having done, that they fall asleep upon it. They cannot empty an egg but they turn into the shell, and lie down!"

The words drew my eyes from the woman to the raven.

I saw no raven, but the librarian--the same slender elderly man, in a rusty black coat, large in the body and long in the tails. I had seen only his back before; now for the first time I saw his face. It was so thin that it showed the shape of the bones under it, suggesting the skulls his last-claimed profession must have made him familiar with. But in truth I had never before seen a face so alive, or a look so keen or so friendly as that in his pale blue eyes, which yet had a haze about them as if they had done much weeping.

"You knew I was not a raven!" he said with a smile.

"I knew you were Mr. Raven," I replied; "but somehow I thought you a bird too!"

"What made you think me a bird?"

"You looked a raven, and I saw you dig worms out of the earth with your beak."

"And then?"

"Toss them in the air." "And then?"

"They grew butterflies, and flew away."

"Did you ever see a raven do that? I told you I was a sexton!"

"Does a sexton toss worms in the air, and turn them into butterflies?"

"Yes."

"I never saw one do it!"

"You saw me do it!--But I am still librarian in your house, for I never was dismissed, and never gave up the office. Now I am librarian here as well."

"But you have just told me you were sexton here!"

"So I am. It is much the same profession. Except you are a true sexton, books are but dead bodies to you, and a library nothing but a catacomb!"

"You bewilder me!"

"That's all right!"

A few moments he stood silent. The woman, moveless as a statue, stood silent also by the coffin-door.

"Upon occasion," said the sexton at length, "it is more convenient to put one's bird-self in front. Every one, as you ought to know, has a beast-self--and a bird-self, and a stupid fish-self, ay, and a creeping serpent-self too--which it takes a deal of crushing to kill! In truth he has also a tree-self and a crystal-self, and I don't know how many selves more--all to get into harmony. You can tell what sort a man is by his creature that comes oftenest to the front."

He turned to his wife, and I considered him more closely. He was above the ordinary height, and stood more erect than when last I saw him. His face was, like his wife's, very pale; its nose handsomely encased the beak that had retired within it; its lips were very thin, and even they had no colour, but their curves were beautiful, and about them quivered a shadowy smile that had humour in it as well as love and pity.

"We are in want of something to eat and drink, wife," he said; "we have come a long way!"

"You know, husband," she answered, "we can give only to him that asks."

She turned her unchanging face and radiant eyes upon mine.

"Please give me something to eat, Mrs. Raven," I said, "and something--what you will--to quench my thirst."

"Your thirst must be greater before you can have what will quench it," she replied; "but what I can give you, I will gladly."

She went to a cupboard in the wall, brought from it bread and wine, and set them on the table.

We sat down to the perfect meal; and as I ate, the bread and wine seemed to go deeper than the hunger and thirst. Anxiety and discomfort vanished; expectation took their place.

I grew very sleepy, and now first felt weary.

"I have earned neither food nor sleep, Mrs. Raven," I said, "but you have given me the one freely, and now I hope you will give me the other, for I sorely need it."

"Sleep is too fine a thing ever to be earned," said the sexton; "it must be given and accepted, for it is a necessity. But it would be perilous to use this house as a half-way hostelry--for the repose of a night, that is, merely."

A wild-looking little black cat jumped on his knee as he spoke. He patted it as one pats a child to make it go to sleep: he seemed to me patting down the sod upon a grave--patting it lovingly, with an inward lullaby.

"Here is one of Mara's kittens!" he said to his wife: "will you give it something and put it out? she may want it!"

The woman took it from him gently, gave it a little piece of bread, and went out with it, closing the door behind her.

"How then am I to make use of your hospitality?" I asked.

"By accepting it to the full," he answered.

"I do not understand."

"In this house no one wakes of himself."

"Why?"

"Because no one anywhere ever wakes of himself. You can wake yourself no more than you can make yourself."

"Then perhaps you or Mrs. Raven would kindly call me!" I said, still nowise understanding, but feeling afresh that vague foreboding.

"We cannot."

"How dare I then go to sleep?" I cried.

"If you would have the rest of this house, you must not trouble yourself about waking. You must go to sleep heartily, altogether and outright." My soul sank within me.

The sexton sat looking me in the face. His eyes seemed to say, "Will you not trust me?" I returned his gaze, and answered,

"I will."

"Then come," he said; "I will show you your couch."

As we rose, the woman came in. She took up the candle, turned to the inner door, and led the way. I went close behind her, and the sexton followed.

CHAPTER VII

THE CEMETERY

The air as of an ice-house met me crossing the threshold. The door fell-to behind us. The sexton said something to his wife that made her turn toward us.--What a change had passed upon her! It was as if the splendour of her eyes had grown too much for them to hold, and, sinking into her countenance, made it flash with a loveliness like that of Beatrice in the white rose of the redeemed. Life itself, life eternal, immortal, streamed from it, an unbroken lightning. Even her hands shone with a white radiance, every "pearl-shell helmet" gleaming like a moonstone. Her beauty was overpowering; I was glad when she turned it from me.

But the light of the candle reached such a little way, that at first I could see nothing of the place. Presently, however, it fell on something that glimmered, a little raised from the floor. Was it a bed? Could live thing sleep in such a mortal cold? Then surely it was no wonder it should not wake of itself! Beyond that appeared a fainter shine; and then I thought I descried uncertain gleams on every side.

A few paces brought us to the first; it was a human form under a sheet, straight and still--whether of man or woman I could not tell, for the light seemed to avoid the face as we passed.

I soon perceived that we were walking along an aisle of couches, on almost every one of which, with its head to the passage, lay something asleep or dead, covered with a sheet white as snow. My soul grew silent with dread. Through aisle after aisle we went, among couches innumerable. I could see only a few of them at once, but they were on all sides, vanishing, as it seemed, in the infinite.--Was it here lay my choice of a bed? Must I go to sleep among the unwaking, with no one to rouse me? Was this the sexton's library? were these his books? Truly it was no half-way house, this chamber of the dead!

"One of the cellars I am placed to watch!" remarked Mr. Raven--in a low voice, as if fearing to disturb his silent guests. "Much wine is set here to ripen!--But it is dark for a stranger!" he added.

"The moon is rising; she will soon be here," said his wife, and her clear voice, low and sweet, sounded of ancient sorrow long bidden adieu.

Even as she spoke the moon looked in at an opening in the wall, and a thousand gleams of white responded to her shine. But not yet could I descry beginning or end of the couches. They stretched away and away, as if for all the disparted world to sleep upon. For along the far receding narrow ways, every couch stood by itself, and on each slept a lonely sleeper. I thought at first their sleep was death, but I soon saw it was something deeper still--a something I did not know.

The moon rose higher, and shone through other openings, but I could never see enough of the place at once to know its shape or character; now it would resemble a long cathedral nave, now a huge barn made into a dwelling of tombs. She looked colder than any moon in the frostiest night of the world, and where she shone direct upon them, cast a bluish, icy gleam on the white sheets and the pallid countenances--but it might be the faces that made the moon so cold!

Of such as I could see, all were alike in the brotherhood of death, all unlike in the character and history recorded upon them. Here lay a man who had died--for although this was not death, I have no other name to give it--in the prime of manly strength; his dark beard seemed to flow like a liberated stream from the glacier of his frozen countenance; his forehead was smooth as polished marble; a shadow of pain lingered about his lips, but only a shadow. On the next couch lay the form of a girl, passing lovely to behold. The sadness left on her face by parting was not yet absorbed in perfect peace, but absolute submission possessed the placid features, which bore no sign of wasting disease, of "killing care or grief of heart": if pain had been there, it was long charmed asleep, never again to wake. Many were the beautiful that there lay very still-- some of them mere children; but I did not see one infant. The most beautiful of all was a lady whose white hair, and that alone, suggested her old when first she fell asleep. On her stately countenance rested--not submission, but a right noble acquiescence, an assurance, firm as the foundations of the universe, that all was as it should be. On some faces lingered the almost obliterated scars of strife, the marrings of hopeless loss, the fading shadows of sorrows that had seemed inconsolable: the aurora of the great morning had not yet quite melted them away; but those faces were few, and every one that bore such brand of pain seemed to plead, "Pardon me: I died only yesterday!" or, "Pardon me: I died but a century ago!" That some had been dead for ages I knew, not merely by their unutterable repose, but by something for which I have neither word nor symbol.

We came at last to three empty couches, immediately beyond which lay the form of a beautiful woman, a little past the prime of life. One of her arms was outside the sheet, and her hand lay with the palm upward, in its centre a dark spot. Next to her was the stalwart figure of a man of middle age. His arm too was outside the sheet, the strong hand almost closed, as if clenched on the grip of a sword. I thought he must be a king who had died fighting for the truth.

"Will you hold the candle nearer, wife?" whispered the sexton, bending down to examine the woman's hand.

"It heals well," he murmured to himself: "the nail found in her nothing to hurt!"

At last I ventured to speak.

"Are they not dead?" I asked softly.

"I cannot answer you," he replied in a subdued voice. "I almost forget what they mean by DEAD in the old world. If I said a person was dead, my wife would understand one thing, and you would imagine another.--This is but one of my treasure vaults," he went on, "and all my guests are not laid in vaults: out there on the moor they lie thick as the leaves of a forest after the first blast of your winter--thick, let me say rather, as if the great white rose of heaven had shed its petals over it. All night the moon reads their faces, and smiles."

"But why leave them in the corrupting moonlight?" I asked.

"Our moon," he answered, "is not like yours--the old cinder of a burnt-out world; her beams embalm the dead, not corrupt them. You observe that here the sexton lays his dead on the earth; be buries very few under it! In your world he lays huge stones on them, as if to keep them down; I watch for the hour to ring the resurrection-bell, and wake those that are still asleep. Your sexton looks at the clock to know when to ring the dead-alive to church; I hearken for the cock on the spire to crow; `AWAKE, THOU THAT SLEEPEST, AND ARISE FROM THE DEAD!'"

I began to conclude that the self-styled sexton was in truth an insane parson: the whole thing was too mad! But how was I to get away from it? I was helpless! In this world of the dead, the raven and his wife were the only living I had yet seen: whither should I turn for help? I was lost in a space larger than imagination; for if here two things, or any parts of them, could occupy the same space, why not twenty or ten thousand?--But I dared not think further in that direction.

"You seem in your dead to see differences beyond my perception!" I ventured to remark.

"None of those you see," he answered, "are in truth quite dead yet, and some have but just begun to come alive and die. Others had begun to die, that is to come alive, long before they came to us; and when such are indeed dead, that instant they will wake and leave us. Almost every night some rise and go. But I will not say more, for I find my words only mislead you!--This is the couch that has been waiting for you," he ended, pointing to one of the three.

"Why just this?" I said, beginning to tremble, and anxious by parley to delay.

"For reasons which one day you will be glad to know," he answered.

"Why not know them now?"

"That also you will know when you wake."

"But these are all dead, and I am alive!" I objected, shuddering.

"Not much," rejoined the sexton with a smile, "--not nearly enough! Blessed be the true life that the pauses between its throbs are not death!"

"The place is too cold to let one sleep!" I said.

"Do these find it so?" he returned. "They sleep well--or will soon. Of cold they feel not a breath: it heals their wounds.--Do not be a coward, Mr. Vane. Turn your back on fear, and your face to whatever may come. Give yourself up to the night, and you will rest indeed. Harm will not come to you, but a good you cannot foreknow."

The sexton and I stood by the side of the couch, his wife, with the candle in her hand, at the foot of it. Her eyes were full of light, but her face was again of a still whiteness; it was no longer radiant.

"Would they have me make of a charnel-house my bed-chamber?" I cried aloud. "I will not. I will lie abroad on the heath; it cannot be colder there!"

"I have just told you that the dead are there also,

`Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks In Vallombrosa,'"

said the librarian.

"I will NOT," I cried again; and in the compassing dark, the two gleamed out like spectres that waited on the dead; neither answered me; each stood still and sad, and looked at the other.

"Be of good comfort; we watch the flock of the great shepherd," said the sexton to his wife.

Then he turned to me.

"Didst thou not find the air of the place pure and sweet when thou enteredst it?" he asked.

"Yes; but oh, so cold!" I answered.

"Then know," he returned, and his voice was stern, "that thou who callest thyself alive, hast brought into this chamber the odours of death, and its air will not be wholesome for the sleepers until thou art gone from it!"

They went farther into the great chamber, and I was left alone in the moonlight with the dead.

I turned to escape.

What a long way I found it back through the dead! At first I was too angry to be afraid, but as I grew calm, the still shapes grew terrible. At last, with loud offence to the gracious silence, I ran, I fled wildly, and, bursting out, flung-to the door behind me. It closed with an awful silence.

I stood in pitch-darkness. Feeling about me, I found a door, opened it, and was aware of the dim light of a lamp. I stood in my library, with the handle of the masked door in my hand.

Had I come to myself out of a vision?--or lost myself by going back to one? Which was the real--what I now saw, or what I had just ceased to see? Could both be real, interpenetrating yet unmingling?

I threw myself on a couch, and fell asleep.

In the library was one small window to the east, through which, at this time of the year, the first rays of the sun shone upon a mirror whence they were reflected on the masked door: when I woke, there they shone, and thither they drew my eyes. With the feeling that behind it must lie the boundless chamber I had left by that door, I sprang to my feet, and opened it. The light, like an eager hound, shot before me into the closet, and pounced upon the gilded edges of a large book.

"What idiot," I cried, "has put that book in the shelf the wrong way?"

But the gilded edges, reflecting the light a second time, flung it on a nest of drawers in a dark corner, and I saw that one of them was half open.

"More meddling!" I cried, and went to close the drawer.

It contained old papers, and seemed more than full, for it would not close. Taking the topmost one out, I perceived that it was in my father's writing and of some length. The words on which first my eyes fell, at once made me eager to learn what it contained. I carried it to the library, sat down in one of the western windows, and read what follows.

CHAPTER VIII

MY FATHER'S MANUSCRIPT

I am filled with awe of what I have to write. The sun is shining golden above me; the sea lies blue beneath his gaze; the same world sends its growing things up to the sun, and its flying things into the air which I have breathed from my infancy; but I know the outspread splendour a passing show, and that at any moment it may, like the drop-scene of a stage, be lifted to reveal more wonderful things.

Shortly after my father's death, I was seated one morning in the library. I had been, somewhat listlessly, regarding the portrait that hangs among the books, which I knew only as that of a distant ancestor, and wishing I could learn something of its original. Then I had taken a book from the shelves and begun to read.

Glancing up from it, I saw coming toward me--not between me and the door, but between me and the portrait--a thin pale man in rusty black. He looked sharp and eager, and had a notable nose, at once reminding me of a certain jug my sisters used to call Mr. Crow.

"Finding myself in your vicinity, Mr. Vane, I have given myself the pleasure of calling," he said, in a peculiar but not disagreeable voice. "Your honoured grandfather treated me--I may say it without presumption--as a friend, having known me from childhood as his father's librarian."

It did not strike me at the time how old the man must be.

"May I ask where you live now, Mr. Crow?" I said.

He smiled an amused smile.

"You nearly hit my name," he rejoined, "which shows the family insight. You have seen me before, but only once, and could not then have heard it!"

"Where was that?"

"In this very room. You were quite a child, however!"

I could not be sure that I remembered him, but for a moment I fancied I did, and I begged him to set me right as to his name.

"There is such a thing as remembering without recognising the memory in it," he remarked. "For my name--which you have near enough--it used to be Raven."

I had heard the name, for marvellous tales had brought it me.

"It is very kind of you to come and see me," I said. "Will you not sit down?"

He seated himself at once.

"You knew my father, then, I presume?"

"I knew him," he answered with a curious smile, "but he did not care about my acquaintance, and we never met.--That gentleman, however," he added, pointing to the portrait,--"old Sir Up'ard, his people called him,--was in his day a friend of mine yet more intimate than ever your grandfather became."

Then at length I began to think the interview a strange one. But in truth it was hardly stranger that my visitor should remember Sir Upward, than that he should have been my great-grandfather's librarian!

"I owe him much," he continued; "for, although I had read many more books than he, yet, through the special direction of his studies, he was able to inform me of a certain relation of modes which I should never have discovered of myself, and could hardly have learned from any one else."

"Would you mind telling me all about that?" I said.

"By no means--as much at least as I am able: there are not such things as wilful secrets," he answered--and went on.

"That closet held his library--a hundred manuscripts or so, for printing was not then invented. One morning I sat there, working at a catalogue of them, when he looked in at the door, and said, `Come.' I laid down my pen and followed him--across the great hall, down a steep rough descent, and along an underground passage to a tower he had lately built, consisting of a stair and a room at the top of it. The door of this room had a tremendous lock, which he undid with the smallest key I ever saw. I had scarcely crossed the threshold after him, when, to my eyes, he began to dwindle, and grew less and less. All at once my vision seemed to come right, and I saw that he was moving swiftly away from me. In a minute more he was the merest speck in the distance, with the tops of blue mountains beyond him, clear against a sky of paler blue. I recognised the country, for I had gone there and come again many a time, although I had never known this way to it.

"Many years after, when the tower had long disappeared, I taught one of his descendants what Sir Upward had taught me; and now and then to this day I use your house when I want to go the nearest way home. I must indeed--without your leave, for which I ask your pardon--have by this time well established a right of way through it--not from front to back, but from bottom to top!"

"You would have me then understand, Mr. Raven," I said, "that you go through my house into another world, heedless of disparting space?"

"That I go through it is an incontrovertible acknowledgement of space," returned the old librarian.

"Please do not quibble, Mr. Raven," I rejoined. "Please to take my question as you know I mean it."

"There is in your house a door, one step through which carries me into a world very much another than this."

"A better?"

"Not throughout; but so much another that most of its physical, and many of its mental laws are different from those of this world. As for moral laws, they must everywhere be fundamentally the same."

"You try my power of belief!" I said.

"You take me for a madman, probably?"

"You do not look like one."

"A liar then?"

"You give me no ground to think you such."

"Only you do not believe me?"

"I will go out of that door with you if you like: I believe in you enough to risk the attempt."

"The blunder all my children make!" he murmured. "The only door out is the door in!"

I began to think he must be crazy. He sat silent for a moment, his head resting on his hand, his elbow on the table, and his eyes on the books before him.

"A book," he said louder, "is a door in, and therefore a door out.--I see old Sir Up'ard," he went on, closing his eyes, "and my heart swells with love to him:--what world is he in?"

"The world of your heart!" I replied; "--that is, the idea of him is there."

"There is one world then at least on which your hall-door does not open?"

"I grant you so much; but the things in that world are not things to have and to hold."

"Think a little farther," he rejoined: "did anything ever become yours, except by getting into that world?--The thought is beyond you, however, at present!--I tell you there are more worlds, and more doors to them, than you will think of in many years!"

He rose, left the library, crossed the hall, and went straight up to the garret, familiar evidently with every turn. I followed, studying his back. His hair hung down long and dark, straight and glossy. His coat was wide and reached to his heels. His shoes seemed too large for him.

In the garret a light came through at the edges of the great roofing slabs, and showed us parts where was no flooring, and we must step from joist to joist: in the middle of one of these spaces rose a partition, with a door: through it I followed Mr. Raven into a small, obscure chamber, whose top contracted as it rose, and went slanting through the roof.

"That is the door I spoke of," he said, pointing to an oblong mirror that stood on the floor and leaned against the wall. I went in front of it, and saw our figures dimly reflected in its dusty face. There was something about it that made me uneasy. It looked old-fashioned and neglected, but, notwithstanding its ordinary seeming, the eagle, perched with outstretched wings on the top, appeared threatful.

"As a mirror," said the librarian, "it has grown dingy with age; but that is no matter: its doorness depends on the light."

"Light!" I rejoined; "there is no light here!"

He did not answer me, but began to pull at a little chain on the opposite wall. I heard a creaking: the top of the chamber was turning slowly round. He ceased pulling, looked at his watch, and began to pull again.

"We arrive almost to the moment!" he said; "it is on the very stroke of noon!"

The top went creaking and revolving for a minute or so. Then he pulled two other chains, now this, now that, and returned to the first. A moment more and the chamber grew much clearer: a patch of sunlight had fallen upon a mirror on the wall opposite that against which the other leaned, and on the dust I saw the path of the reflected rays to the mirror on the ground. But from the latter none were returned; they seemed to go clean through; there was nowhere in the chamber a second patch of light!

"Where are the sunrays gone?" I cried.

"That I cannot tell," returned Mr. Raven; "--back, perhaps, to where they came from first. They now belong, I fancy, to a sense not yet developed in us."

He then talked of the relations of mind to matter, and of senses to qualities, in a way I could only a little understand, whence he went on to yet stranger things which I could not at all comprehend. He spoke much about dimensions, telling me that there were many more than three, some of them concerned with powers which were indeed in us, but of which as yet we knew absolutely nothing. His words, however, I confess, took little more hold of me than the light did of the mirror, for I thought he hardly knew what he was saying.

Suddenly I was aware that our forms had gone from the mirror, which seemed full of a white mist. As I gazed I saw, growing gradually visible beyond the mist, the tops of a range of mountains, which became clearer and clearer. Soon the mist vanished entirely, uncovering the face of a wide heath, on which, at some distance, was the figure of a man moving swiftly away. I turned to address my companion; he was no longer by my side. I looked again at the form in the mirror, and recognised the wide coat flying, the black hair lifting in a wind that did not touch me. I rushed in terror from the place.

CHAPTER IX

I REPENT

I laid the manuscript down, consoled to find that my father had had a peep into that mysterious world, and that he knew Mr. Raven.

Then I remembered that I had never heard the cause or any circumstance of my father's death, and began to believe that he must at last have followed Mr. Raven, and not come back; whereupon I speedily grew ashamed of my flight. What wondrous facts might I not by this time have gathered concerning life and death, and wide regions beyond ordinary perception! Assuredly the Ravens were good people, and a night in their house would nowise have hurt me! They were doubtless strange, but it was faculty in which the one was peculiar, and beauty in which the other was marvellous! And I had not believed in them! had treated them as unworthy of my confidence, as harbouring a design against me! The more I thought of my behaviour to them, the more disgusted I became with myself. Why should I have feared such dead? To share their holy rest was an honour of which I had proved myself unworthy! What harm could that sleeping king, that lady with the wound in her palm, have done me? I fell a longing after the sweet and stately stillness of their two countenances, and wept. Weeping I threw myself on a couch, and suddenly fell asleep.

As suddenly I woke, feeling as if some one had called me. The house was still as an empty church. A blackbird was singing on the lawn. I said to myself, "I will go and tell them I am ashamed, and will do whatever they would have me do!" I rose, and went straight up the stairs to the garret.

The wooden chamber was just as when first I saw it, the mirror dimly reflecting everything before it. It was nearly noon, and the sun would be a little higher than when first I came: I must raise the hood a little, and adjust the mirrors accordingly! If I had but been in time to see Mr. Raven do it!

I pulled the chains, and let the light fall on the first mirror. I turned then to the other: there were the shapes of the former vision--distinguishable indeed, but tremulous like a landscape in a pool ruffled by "a small pipling wind!" I touched the glass; it was impermeable.

Suspecting polarisation as the thing required, I shifted and shifted the mirrors, changing their relation, until at last, in a great degree, so far as I was concerned, by chance, things came right between them, and I saw the mountains blue and steady and clear. I stepped forward, and my feet were among the heather.

All I knew of the way to the cottage was that we had gone through a pine-forest. I passed through many thickets and several small fir-woods, continually fancying afresh that I recognised something of the country; but I had come upon no forest, and now the sun was near the horizon, and the air had begun to grow chill with the coming winter, when, to my delight, I saw a little black object coming toward me: it was indeed the raven!

I hastened to meet him.

"I beg your pardon, sir, for my rudeness last night," I said. "Will you take me with you now? I heartily confess I do not deserve it."

"Ah!" he returned, and looked up. Then, after a brief pause, "My wife does not expect you to-night," he said. "She regrets that we at all encouraged your staying last week."

"Take me to her that I may tell her how sorry I am," I begged humbly.

"It is of no use," he answered. "Your night was not come then, or you would not have left us. It is not come now, and I cannot show you the way. The dead were rejoicing under their daisies--they all lie among the roots of the flowers of heaven--at the thought of your delight when the winter should be past, and the morning with its birds come: ere you left them, they shivered in their beds. When the spring of the universe arrives,--but that cannot be for ages yet! how many, I do not know--and do not care to know."

"Tell me one thing, I beg of you, Mr. Raven: is my father with you? Have you seen him since he left the world?"

"Yes; he is with us, fast asleep. That was he you saw with his arm on the coverlet, his hand half closed."

"Why did you not tell me? That I should have been so near him, and not know!"

"And turn your back on him!" corrected the raven.

"I would have lain down at once had I known!"

"I doubt it. Had you been ready to lie down, you would have known him!--Old Sir Up'ard," he went on, "and your twice great-grandfather, both are up and away long ago. Your great-grandfather has been with us for many a year; I think he will soon begin to stir. You saw him last night, though of course you did not know him."

"Why OF COURSE?"

"Because he is so much nearer waking than you. No one who will not sleep can ever wake."

"I do not at all understand you!"

"You turned away, and would not understand!" I held my peace.--But if I did not say something, he would go!

"And my grandfather--is he also with you?" I asked.

"No; he is still in the Evil Wood, fighting the dead."

"Where is the Evil Wood, that I may find him?"

"You will not find him; but you will hardly miss the wood. It is the place where those who will not sleep, wake up at night, to kill their dead and bury them."

"I cannot understand you!"

"Naturally not. Neither do I understand you; I can read neither your heart nor your face. When my wife and I do not understand our children, it is because there is not enough of them to be understood. God alone can understand foolishness."

"Then," I said, feeling naked and very worthless, "will you be so good as show me the nearest way home? There are more ways than one, I know, for I have gone by two already."

"There are indeed many ways."

"Tell me, please, how to recognise the nearest."

"I cannot," answered the raven; "you and I use the same words with different meanings. We are often unable to tell people what they NEED to know, because they WANT to know something else, and would therefore only misunderstand what we said. Home is ever so far away in the palm of your hand, and how to get there it is of no use to tell you. But you will get there; you must get there; you have to get there. Everybody who is not at home, has to go home. You thought you were at home where I found you: if that had been your home, you could not have left it. Nobody can leave home. And nobody ever was or ever will be at home without having gone there."

"Enigma treading on enigma!" I exclaimed. "I did not come here to be asked riddles."

"No; but you came, and found the riddles waiting for you! Indeed you are yourself the only riddle. What you call riddles are truths, and seem riddles because you are not true."

"Worse and worse!" I cried.

"And you MUST answer the riddles!" he continued. "They will go on asking themselves until you understand yourself. The universe is a riddle trying to get out, and you are holding your door hard against it."

"Will you not in pity tell me what I am to do--where I must go?"

"How should I tell YOUR to-do, or the way to it?"

"If I am not to go home, at least direct me to some of my kind."

"I do not know of any. The beings most like you are in that direction."

He pointed with his beak. I could see nothing but the setting sun, which blinded me.

"Well," I said bitterly, "I cannot help feeling hardly treated--taken from my home, abandoned in a strange world, and refused instruction as to where I am to go or what I am to do!"

"You forget," said the raven, "that, when I brought you and you declined my hospitality, you reached what you call home in safety: now you are come of yourself! Good night."

He turned and walked slowly away, with his beak toward the ground. I stood dazed. It was true I had come of myself, but had I not come with intent of atonement? My heart was sore, and in my brain was neither quest nor purpose, hope nor desire. I gazed after the raven, and would have followed him, but felt it useless.

All at once he pounced on a spot, throwing the whole weight of his body on his bill, and for some moments dug vigorously. Then with a flutter of his wings he threw back his head, and something shot from his bill, cast high in the air. That moment the sun set, and the air at once grew very dusk, but the something opened into a soft radiance, and came pulsing toward me like a fire-fly, but with a much larger and a yellower light. It flew over my head. I turned and followed it.

Here I interrupt my narrative to remark that it involves a constant struggle to say what cannot be said with even an approach to precision, the things recorded being, in their nature and in that of the creatures concerned in them, so inexpressibly different from any possible events of this economy, that I can present them only by giving, in the forms and language of life in this world, the modes in which they affected me--not the things themselves, but the feelings they woke in me. Even this much, however, I do with a continuous and abiding sense of failure, finding it impossible to present more than one phase of a multitudinously complicated significance, or one concentric sphere of a graduated embodiment. A single thing would sometimes seem to be and mean many things, with an uncertain identity at the heart of them, which kept constantly altering their look. I am indeed often driven to set down what I know to be but a clumsy and doubtful representation of the mere feeling aimed at, none of the communicating media of this world being fit to convey it, in its peculiar strangeness, with even an approach to clearness or certainty. Even to one who knew the region better than myself, I should have no assurance of transmitting the reality of my experience in it. While without a doubt, for instance, that I was actually regarding a scene of activity, I might be, at the same moment, in my consciousness aware that I was perusing a metaphysical argument.

CHAPTER X

THE BAD BURROW

As the air grew black and the winter closed swiftly around me, the fluttering fire blazed out more luminous, and arresting its flight, hovered waiting. So soon as I came under its radiance, it flew slowly on, lingering now and then above spots where the ground was rocky. Every time I looked up, it seemed to have grown larger, and at length gave me an attendant shadow. Plainly a bird-butterfly, it flew with a certain swallowy double. Its wings were very large, nearly square, and flashed all the colours of the rainbow. Wondering at their splendour, I became so absorbed in their beauty that I stumbled over a low rock, and lay stunned. When I came to myself, the creature was hovering over my head, radiating the whole chord of light, with multitudinous gradations and some kinds of colour I had never before seen. I rose and went on, but, unable to take my eyes off the shining thing to look to my steps, I struck my foot against a stone. Fearing then another fall, I sat down to watch the little glory, and a great longing awoke in me to have it in my hand. To my unspeakable delight, it began to sink toward me. Slowly at first, then swiftly it sank, growing larger as it came nearer. I felt as if the treasure of the universe were giving itself to me-- put out my hand, and had it. But the instant I took it, its light went out; all was dark as pitch; a dead book with boards outspread lay cold and heavy in my hand. I threw it in the air--only to hear it fall among the heather. Burying my face in my hands, I sat in motionless misery.

But the cold grew so bitter that, fearing to be frozen, I got up. The moment I was on my feet, a faint sense of light awoke in me. "Is it coming to life?" I cried, and a great pang of hope shot through me. Alas, no! it was the edge of a moon peering up keen and sharp over a level horizon! She brought me light--but no guidance! SHE would not hover over me, would not wait on my faltering steps! She could but offer me an ignorant choice!

With a full face she rose, and I began to see a little about me. Westward of her, and not far from me, a range of low hills broke the horizon-line: I set out for it.

But what a night I had to pass ere I reached it! The moon seemed to know something, for she stared at me oddly. Her look was indeed icy-cold, but full of interest, or at least curiosity. She was not the same moon I had known on the earth; her face was strange to me, and her light yet stranger. Perhaps it came from an unknown sun! Every time I looked up, I found her staring at me with all her might! At first I was annoyed, as at the rudeness of a fellow creature; but soon I saw or fancied a certain wondering pity in her gaze: why was I out in her night? Then first I knew what an awful thing it was to be awake in the universe: I WAS, and could not help it!

As I walked, my feet lost the heather, and trod a bare spongy soil, something like dry, powdery peat. To my dismay it gave a momentary heave under me; then presently I saw what seemed the ripple of an earthquake running on before me, shadowy in the low moon. It passed into the distance; but, while yet I stared after it, a single wave rose up, and came slowly toward me. A yard or two away it burst, and from it, with a scramble and a bound, issued an animal like a tiger. About his mouth and ears hung clots of mould, and his eyes winked and flamed as he rushed at me, showing his white teeth in a soundless snarl. I stood fascinated, unconscious of either courage or fear. He turned his head to the ground, and plunged into it.

"That moon is affecting my brain," I said as I resumed my journey. "What life can be here but the phantasmic--the stuff of which dreams are made? I am indeed walking in a vain show!"

Thus I strove to keep my heart above the waters of fear, nor knew that she whom I distrusted was indeed my defence from the realities I took for phantoms: her light controlled the monsters, else had I scarce taken a second step on the hideous ground. "I will not be appalled by that which only seems!" I said to myself, yet felt it a terrible thing to walk on a sea where such fishes disported themselves below. With that, a step or two from me, the head of a worm began to come slowly out of the earth, as big as that of a polar bear and much resembling it, with a white mane to its red neck. The drawing wriggles with which its huge length extricated itself were horrible, yet I dared not turn my eyes from them. The moment its tail was free, it lay as if exhausted, wallowing in feeble effort to burrow again.

"Does it live on the dead," I wondered, "and is it unable to hurt the living? If they scent their prey and come out, why do they leave me unharmed?"

I know now it was that the moon paralysed them.

All the night through as I walked, hideous creatures, no two alike, threatened me. In some of them, beauty of colour enhanced loathliness of shape: one large serpent was covered from head to distant tail with feathers of glorious hues.

I became at length so accustomed to their hurtless menaces that I fell to beguiling the way with the invention of monstrosities, never suspecting that I owed each moment of life to the staring moon. Though hers was no primal radiance, it so hampered the evil things, that I walked in safety. For light is yet light, if but the last of a countless series of reflections! How swiftly would not my feet have carried me over the restless soil, had I known that, if still within their range when her lamp ceased to shine on the cursed spot, I should that moment be at the mercy of such as had no mercy, the centre of a writhing heap of hideousness, every individual of it as terrible as before it had but seemed! Fool of ignorance, I watched the descent of the weary, solemn, anxious moon down the widening vault above me, with no worse uneasiness than the dread of losing my way--where as yet I had indeed no way to lose.

I was drawing near the hills I had made my goal, and she was now not far from their sky-line, when the soundless wallowing ceased, and the burrow lay motionless and bare. Then I saw, slowly walking over the light soil, the form of a woman. A white mist floated about her, now assuming, now losing to reassume the shape of a garment, as it gathered to her or was blown from her by a wind that dogged her steps.

She was beautiful, but with such a pride at once and misery on her countenance that I could hardly believe what yet I saw. Up and down she walked, vainly endeavouring to lay hold of the mist and wrap it around her. The eyes in the beautiful face were dead, and on her left side was a dark spot, against which she would now and then press her hand, as if to stifle pain or sickness. Her hair hung nearly to her feet, and sometimes the wind would so mix it with the mist that I could not distinguish the one from the other; but when it fell gathering together again, it shone a pale gold in the moonlight.

Suddenly pressing both hands on her heart, she fell to the ground, and the mist rose from her and melted in the air. I ran to her. But she began to writhe in such torture that I stood aghast. A moment more and her legs, hurrying from her body, sped away serpents. From her shoulders fled her arms as in terror, serpents also. Then something flew up from her like a bat, and when I looked again, she was gone. The ground rose like the sea in a storm; terror laid hold upon me; I turned to the hills and ran.

I was already on the slope of their base, when the moon sank behind one of their summits, leaving me in its shadow. Behind me rose a waste and sickening cry, as of frustrate desire--the only sound I had heard since the fall of the dead butterfly; it made my heart shake like a flag in the wind. I turned, saw many dark objects bounding after me, and made for the crest of a ridge on which the moon still shone. She seemed to linger there that I might see to defend myself. Soon I came in sight of her, and climbed the faster.

Crossing the shadow of a rock, I heard the creatures panting at my heels. But just as the foremost threw himself upon me with a snarl of greedy hate, we rushed into the moon together. She flashed out an angry light, and he fell from me a bodiless blotch. Strength came to me, and I turned on the rest. But one by one as they darted into the light, they dropped with a howl; and I saw or fancied a strange smile on the round face above me.

I climbed to the top of the ridge: far away shone the moon, sinking to a low horizon. The air was pure and strong. I descended a little way, found it warmer, and sat down to wait the dawn.

The moon went below, and the world again was dark.

CHAPTER XI

THE EVIL WOOD

I fell fast asleep, and when I woke the sun was rising. I went to the top again, and looked back: the hollow I had crossed in the moonlight lay without sign of life. Could it be that the calm expanse before me swarmed with creatures of devouring greed?

I turned and looked over the land through which my way must lie. It seemed a wide desert, with a patch of a different colour in the distance that might be a forest. Sign of presence, human or animal, was none--smoke or dust or shadow of cultivation. Not a cloud floated in the clear heaven; no thinnest haze curtained any segment of its circling rim.

I descended, and set out for the imaginable forest: something alive might be there; on this side of it could not well be anything!

When I reached the plain, I found it, as far as my sight could go, of rock, here flat and channeled, there humped and pinnacled-- evidently the wide bed of a vanished river, scored by innumerable water-runs, without a trace of moisture in them. Some of the channels bore a dry moss, and some of the rocks a few lichens almost as hard as themselves. The air, once "filled with pleasant noise of waters," was silent as death. It took me the whole day to reach the patch,-- which I found indeed a forest--but not a rudiment of brook or runnel had I crossed! Yet through the glowing noon I seemed haunted by an aural mirage, hearing so plainly the voice of many waters that I could hardly believe the opposing testimony of my eyes.

The sun was approaching the horizon when I left the river-bed, and entered the forest. Sunk below the tree-tops, and sending his rays between their pillar-like boles, he revealed a world of blessed shadows waiting to receive me. I had expected a pine-wood, but here were trees of many sorts, some with strong resemblances to trees I knew, others with marvellous differences from any I had ever seen. I threw myself beneath the boughs of what seemed a eucalyptus in blossom: its flowers had a hard calyx much resembling a skull, the top of which rose like a lid to let the froth-like bloom-brain overfoam its cup. From beneath the shadow of its falchion-leaves my eyes went wandering into deep after deep of the forest.

Soon, however, its doors and windows began to close, shutting up aisle and corridor and roomier glade. The night was about me, and instant and sharp the cold. Again what a night I found it! How shall I make my reader share with me its wild ghostiness?

The tree under which I lay rose high before it branched, but the boughs of it bent so low that they seemed ready to shut me in as I leaned against the smooth stem, and let my eyes wander through the brief twilight of the vanishing forest. Presently, to my listless roving gaze, the varied outlines of the clumpy foliage began to assume or imitate--say rather SUGGEST other shapes than their own. A light wind began to blow; it set the boughs of a neighbour tree rocking, and all their branches aswing, every twig and every leaf blending its individual motion with the sway of its branch and the rock of its bough. Among its leafy shapes was a pack of wolves that struggled to break from a wizard's leash: greyhounds would not have strained so savagely! I watched them with an interest that grew as the wind gathered force, and their motions life.

Another mass of foliage, larger and more compact, presented my fancy with a group of horses' heads and forequarters projecting caparisoned from their stalls. Their necks kept moving up and down, with an impatience that augmented as the growing wind broke their vertical rhythm with a wilder swaying from side to side. What heads they were! how gaunt, how strange!--several of them bare skulls--one with the skin tight on its bones! One had lost the under jaw and hung low, looking unutterably weary--but now and then hove high as if to ease the bit. Above them, at the end of a branch, floated erect the form of a woman, waving her arms in imperious gesture. The definiteness of these and other leaf masses first surprised and then discomposed me: what if they should overpower my brain with seeming reality? But the twilight became darkness; the wind ceased; every shape was shut up in the night; I fell asleep.

It was still dark when I began to be aware of a far-off, confused, rushing noise, mingled with faint cries. It grew and grew until a tumult as of gathering multitudes filled the wood. On all sides at once the sounds drew nearer; the spot where I lay seemed the centre of a commotion that extended throughout the forest. I scarce moved hand or foot lest I should betray my presence to hostile things.

The moon at length approached the forest, and came slowly into it: with her first gleam the noises increased to a deafening uproar, and I began to see dim shapes about me. As she ascended and grew brighter, the noises became yet louder, and the shapes clearer. A furious battle was raging around me. Wild cries and roars of rage, shock of onset, struggle prolonged, all mingled with words articulate, surged in my ears. Curses and credos, snarls and sneers, laughter and mockery, sacred names and howls of hate, came huddling in chaotic interpenetration. Skeletons and phantoms fought in maddest confusion. Swords swept through the phantoms: they only shivered. Maces crashed on the skeletons, shattering them hideously: not one fell or ceased to fight, so long as a single joint held two bones together. Bones of men and horses lay scattered and heaped; grinding and crunching them under foot fought the skeletons. Everywhere charged the bone-gaunt white steeds; everywhere on foot or on wind-blown misty battle-horses, raged and ravened and raved the indestructible spectres; weapons and hoofs clashed and crushed; while skeleton jaws and phantom-throats swelled the deafening tumult with the war-cry of every opinion, bad or good, that had bred strife, injustice, cruelty in any world. The holiest words went with the most hating blow. Lie-distorted truths flew hurtling in the wind of javelins and bones. Every moment some one would turn against his comrades, and fight more wildly than before, THE TRUTH! THE TRUTH! still his cry. One I noted who wheeled ever in a circle, and smote on all sides. Wearied out, a pair would sit for a minute side by side, then rise and renew the fierce combat. None stooped to comfort the fallen, or stepped wide to spare him.

The moon shone till the sun rose, and all the night long I had glimpses of a woman moving at her will above the strife-tormented multitude, now on this front now on that, one outstretched arm urging the fight, the other pressed against her side. "Ye are men: slay one another!" she shouted. I saw her dead eyes and her dark spot, and recalled what I had seen the night before.

Such was the battle of the dead, which I saw and heard as I lay under the tree.

Just before sunrise, a breeze went through the forest, and a voice cried, "Let the dead bury their dead!" At the word the contending thousands dropped noiseless, and when the sun looked in, he saw never a bone, but here and there a withered branch.

I rose and resumed my journey, through as quiet a wood as ever grew out of the quiet earth. For the wind of the morning had ceased when the sun appeared, and the trees were silent. Not a bird sang, not another branch of the same river-bed. I began at once to cross it, and was in the bottom of a wide channel when the sun set.

I sat down to await the moon, and growing sleepy, stretched myself on the moss. The moment my head was down, I heard the sounds of rushing streams--all sorts of sweet watery noises. The veiled melody of the molten music sang me into a dreamless sleep, and when I woke the sun was already up, and the wrinkled country widely visible. Covered with shadows it lay striped and mottled like the skin of some wild animal. As the sun rose the shadows diminished, and it seemed as if the rocks were re-absorbing the darkness that had oozed out of them during the night.

Hitherto I had loved my Arab mare and my books more, I fear, than live man or woman; now at length my soul was athirst for a human presence, and I longed even after those inhabitants of this alien world whom the raven had so vaguely described as nearest my sort. With heavy yet hoping heart, and mind haunted by a doubt whether I was going in any direction at all, I kept wearily travelling "north-west and by south."

CHAPTER XII

FRIENDS AND FOES

Coming, in one of the channels, upon what seemed a little shrub, the outlying picket, I trusted, of an army behind it, I knelt to look at it closer. It bore a small fruit, which, as I did not recognise it, I feared to gather and eat. Little I thought that I was watched from behind the rocks by hundreds of eyes eager with the question whether I would or would not take it.

I came to another plant somewhat bigger, then to another larger still, and at length to clumps of a like sort; by which time I saw that they were not shrubs but dwarf-trees. Before I reached the bank of this second branch of the river-bed, I found the channels so full of them that it was with difficulty I crossed such as I could not jump. In one I heard a great rush, as of a multitude of birds from an ivied wall, but saw nothing.

I came next to some large fruit-bearing trees, but what they bore looked coarse. They stood on the edge of a hollow, which evidently had once been the basin of a lake. From the left a forest seemed to flow into and fill it; but while the trees above were of many sorts, those in the hollow were almost entirely fruit-bearing.

I went a few yards down the slope of grass mingled with moss, and stretched myself upon it weary. A little farther down stood a tiny tree full of rosiest apples no bigger than small cherries, its top close to my hand; I pulled and ate one of them. Finding it delicious, I was in the act of taking another, when a sudden shouting of children, mingled with laughter clear and sweet as the music of a brook, startled me with delight.

"He likes our apples! He likes our apples! He's a good giant! He's a good giant!" cried many little voices.

"He's a giant!" objected one.

"He IS rather big," assented another, "but littleness isn't everything! It won't keep you from growing big and stupid except you take care!"

I rose on my elbow and stared. Above and about and below me stood a multitude of children, apparently of all ages, some just able to run alone, and some about twelve or thirteen. Three or four seemed older. They stood in a small knot, a little apart, and were less excited than the rest. The many were chattering in groups, declaiming and contradicting, like a crowd of grown people in a city, only with greater merriment, better manners, and more sense.

I gathered that, by the approach of my hand to a second apple, they knew that I liked the first; but how from that they argued me good, I did not see, nor wondered that one of them at least should suggest caution. I did not open my mouth, for I was afraid of frightening them, and sure I should learn more by listening than by asking questions. For I understood nearly all they said--at which I was not surprised: to understand is not more wonderful than to love.

There came a movement and slight dispersion among them, and presently a sweet, innocent-looking, lovingly roguish little fellow handed me a huge green apple. Silence fell on the noisy throng; all waited expectant.

"Eat, good giant," he said.

I sat up, took the apple, smiled thanks, and would have eaten; but the moment I bit into it, I flung it far away.

Again rose a shout of delight; they flung themselves upon me, so as nearly to smother me; they kissed my face and hands; they laid hold of my legs; they clambered about my arms and shoulders, embracing my head and neck. I came to the ground at last, overwhelmed with the lovely little goblins.

"Good, good giant!" they cried. "We knew you would come! Oh you dear, good, strong giant!"

The babble of their talk sprang up afresh, and ever the jubilant shout would rise anew from hundreds of clear little throats.

Again came a sudden silence. Those around me drew back; those atop of me got off and began trying to set me on my feet. Upon their sweet faces, concern had taken the place of merriment.

"Get up, good giant!" said a little girl. "Make haste! much haste! He saw you throw his apple away!"

Before she ended, I was on my feet. She stood pointing up the slope. On the brow of it was a clownish, bad-looking fellow, a few inches taller than myself. He looked hostile, but I saw no reason to fear him, for he had no weapon, and my little friends had vanished every one.

He began to descend, and I, in the hope of better footing and position, to go up. He growled like a beast as he turned toward me.

Reaching a more level spot, I stood and waited for him. As he came near, he held out his hand. I would have taken it in friendly fashion, but he drew it back, threatened a blow, and held it out again. Then I understood him to claim the apple I had flung away, whereupon I made a grimace of dislike and a gesture of rejection.

He answered with a howl of rage that seemed to say, "Do you dare tell me my apple was not fit to eat?"

"One bad apple may grow on the best tree," I said.

Whether he perceived my meaning I cannot tell, but he made a stride nearer, and I stood on my guard. He delayed his assault, however, until a second giant, much like him, who had been stealing up behind me, was close enough, when he rushed upon me. I met him with a good blow in the face, but the other struck me on the back of the head, and between them I was soon overpowered.

They dragged me into the wood above the valley, where their tribe lived--in wretched huts, built of fallen branches and a few stones. Into one of these they pushed me, there threw me on the ground, and kicked me. A woman was present, who looked on with indifference.

I may here mention that during my captivity I hardly learned to distinguish the women from the men, they differed so little. Often I wondered whether I had not come upon a sort of fungoid people, with just enough mind to give them motion and the expressions of anger and greed. Their food, which consisted of tubers, bulbs, and fruits, was to me inexpressibly disagreeable, but nothing offended them so much as to show dislike to it. I was cuffed by the women and kicked by the men because I would not swallow it.

I lay on the floor that night hardly able to move, but I slept a good deal, and woke a little refreshed. In the morning they dragged me to the valley, and tying my feet, with a long rope, to a tree, put a flat stone with a saw-like edge in my left hand. I shifted it to the right; they kicked me, and put it again in the left; gave me to understand that I was to scrape the bark off every branch that had no fruit on it; kicked me once more, and left me.

I set about the dreary work in the hope that by satisfying them I should be left very much to myself--to make my observations and choose my time for escape. Happily one of the dwarf-trees grew close by me, and every other minute I plucked and ate a small fruit, which wonderfully refreshed and strengthened me.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LITTLE ONES

I had been at work but a few moments, when I heard small voices near me, and presently the Little Ones, as I soon found they called themselves, came creeping out from among the tiny trees that like brushwood filled the spaces between the big ones. In a minute there were scores and scores about me. I made signs that the giants had but just left me, and were not far off; but they laughed, and told me the wind was quite clean.

"They are too blind to see us," they said, and laughed like a multitude of sheep-bells.

"Do you like that rope about your ankles?" asked one.

"I want them to think I cannot take it off," I replied.

"They can scarcely see their own feet!" he rejoined. "Walk with short steps and they will think the rope is all right."

As he spoke, he danced with merriment.

One of the bigger girls got down on her knees to untie the clumsy knot. I smiled, thinking those pretty fingers could do nothing with it, but in a moment it was loose.

They then made me sit down and fed me with delicious little fruits:

they hate every live thing but themselves.--Not that they are much alive either!"

She whistled like a bird. The next instant not one of them was to be seen or heard, and the girl herself had disappeared.

It was my master, as doubtless he counted himself, come to take me home. He freed my ankles, and dragged me to the door of his hut; there he threw me on the ground, again tied my feet, gave me a kick, and left me.

Now I might at once have made my escape; but at length I had friends, and could not think of leaving them. They were so charming, so full of winsome ways, that I must see more of them! I must know them better! "To-morrow," I said to myself with delight, "I shall see them again!" But from the moment there was silence in the huts until I fell asleep, I heard them whispering all about me, and knew that I was lovingly watched by a multitude. After that, I think they hardly ever left me quite alone.

I did not come to know the giants at all, and I believe there was scarcely anything in them to know. They never became in the least friendly, but they were much too stupid to invent cruelties. Often I avoided a bad kick by catching the foot and giving its owner a fall, upon which he never, on that occasion, renewed his attempt.

But the little people were constantly doing and saying things that pleased, often things that surprised me. Every day I grew more loath to leave them. While I was at work, they would keep coming and going, amusing and delighting me, and taking all the misery, and much of the weariness out of my monotonous toil. Very soon I loved them more than I can tell. They did not know much, but they were very wise, and seemed capable of learning anything. I had no bed save the bare ground, but almost as often as I woke, it was in a nest of children-- one or other of them in my arms, though which I seldom could tell until the light came, for they ordered the succession among themselves. When one crept into my bosom, unconsciously I clasped him there, and the rest lay close around me, the smaller nearer. It is hardly necessary to say that I did not suffer much from the nightly cold! The first thing they did in the morning, and the last before sunset, was to bring the good giant plenty to eat.

One morning I was surprised on waking to find myself alone. As I came to my senses, however, I heard subdued sounds of approach, and presently the girl already mentioned, the tallest and gravest of the community, and regarded by all as their mother, appeared from the wood, followed by the multitude in jubilation manifest--but silent lest they should rouse the sleeping giant at whose door I lay. She carried a boy-baby in her arms: hitherto a girl-baby, apparently about a year old, had been the youngest. Three of the bigger girls were her nurses, but they shared their treasure with all the rest. Among the Little Ones, dolls were unknown; the bigger had the smaller, and the smaller the still less, to tend and play with.

Lona came to me and laid the infant in my arms. The baby opened his eyes and looked at me, closed them again, and fell asleep.

"He loves you already!" said the girl.

"Where did you find him?" I asked.

"In the wood, of course," she answered, her eyes beaming with delight, "--where we always find them. Isn't he a beauty? We've been out all night looking for him. Sometimes it is not easy to find!"

"How do you know when there is one to find?" I asked.

"I cannot tell," she replied. "Every one makes haste to tell the other, but we never find out who told first. Sometimes I think one must have said it asleep, and another heard it half-awake. When there is a baby in the wood, no one can stop to ask questions; and when we have found it, then it is too late."

"Do more boy or girl babies come to the wood?"

"How often do you find one?"

"Such a happy thing takes all the glad we've got, and we forget the last time. You too are glad to have him--are you not, good giant?"

"Yes, indeed, I am!" I answered. "But how do you feed him?"

"I will show you," she rejoined, and went away--to return directly with two or three ripe little plums. She put one to the baby's lips.

"He would open his mouth if he were awake," she said, and took him in her arms.

She squeezed a drop to the surface, and again held the fruit to the baby's lips. Without waking he began at once to suck it, and she went on slowly squeezing until nothing but skin and stone were left.

"There!" she cried, in a tone of gentle triumph. "A big-apple world it would be with nothing for the babies! We wouldn't stop in it-- would we, darling? We would leave it to the bad giants!"

"But what if you let the stone into the baby's mouth when you were feeding him?" I said.

"No mother would do that," she replied. "I shouldn't be fit to have a baby!"

I thought what a lovely woman she would grow. But what became of them when they grew up? Where did they go? That brought me again to the question--where did they come from first?

"Will you tell me where you lived before?" I said.

"Here," she replied.

"Have you NEVER lived anywhere else?" I ventured.

"I don't think so. I hope not. I am the biggest. It frightens me sometimes."

"Why should it frighten you?"

She gave me no answer.

"How old are you?" I resumed.

"I do not know what you mean. We are all just that."

"How big will the baby grow?"

"I cannot tell.--Some," she added, with a trouble in her voice, "begin to grow after we think they have stopped.--That is a frightful thing. We don't talk about it!"

"What makes it frightful?"

She was silent for a moment, then answered,

"We fear they may be beginning to grow giants."

"Why should you fear that?"

"Because it is so terrible.--I don't want to talk about it!"

She pressed the baby to her bosom with such an anxious look that I

Ones had never seen any before they saw my tears! They had, nevertheless, it seemed, some dim, instinctive perception of their origin; for a very small child went up to the singer, shook his clenched pud in his face, and said something like this: "'Ou skeeze ze juice out of ze good giant's seeberries! Bad giant!"

"How is it," I said one day to Lona, as she sat with the baby in her arms at the foot of my tree, "that I never see any children among the giants?"

She stared a little, as if looking in vain for some sense in the question, then replied,

"They are giants; there are no little ones."

"Have they never any children?" I asked.

"No; there are never any in the wood for them. They do not love them. If they saw ours, they would stamp them."

"Is there always the same number of the giants then? I thought, before I had time to know better, that they were your fathers and mothers."

She burst into the merriest laughter, and said,

"No, good giant; WE are THEIR firsters."

But as she said it, the merriment died out of her, and she looked scared.

I stopped working, and gazed at her, bewildered.

"How CAN that be?" I exclaimed.

"I do not say; I do not understand," she answered. "But we were here and they not. They go from us. I am sorry, but we cannot help it. THEY could have helped it."

"How long have you been here?" I asked, more and more puzzled--in the hope of some side-light on the matter.

"Always, I think," she replied. "I think somebody made us always."

I turned to my scraping.

She saw I did not understand.

"The giants were not made always," she resumed. "If a Little One doesn't care, he grows greedy, and then lazy, and then big, and then stupid, and then bad. The dull creatures don't know that they come from us. Very few of them believe we are anywhere. They say NONSENSE!--Look at little Blunty: he is eating one of their apples! He will be the next! Oh! oh! he will soon be big and bad and ugly, and not know it!"

The child stood by himself a little way off, eating an apple nearly as big as his head. I had often thought he did not look so good as the rest; now he looked disgusting.

"I will take the horrid thing from him!" I cried.

"It is no use," she answered sadly. "We have done all we can, and it is too late! We were afraid he was growing, for he would not believe anything told him; but when he refused to share his berries, and said he had gathered them for himself, then we knew it! He is a glutton, and there is no hope of him.--It makes me sick to see him eat!"

"Could not some of the boys watch him, and not let him touch the poisonous things?"

"He may have them if he will: it is all one--to eat the apples, and to be a boy that would eat them if he could. No; he must go to the giants! He belongs to them. You can see how much bigger he is than when first you came! He is bigger since yesterday."

"He is as like that hideous green lump in his hand as boy could look!"

"It suits what he is making himself."

"His head and it might change places!"

"Perhaps they do!"

"Does he want to be a giant?"

"He hates the giants, but he is making himself one all the same: he likes their apples! Oh baby, baby, he was just such a darling as you when we found him!"

"He will be very miserable when he finds himself a giant!"

"Oh, no; he will like it well enough! That is the worst of it."

"Will he hate the Little Ones?"

"He will be like the rest; he will not remember us--most likely will not believe there are Little Ones. He will not care; he will eat his apples."

"Do tell me how it will come about. I understand your world so little! I come from a world where everything is different."

"I do not know about WORLD. What is it? What more but a word in your beautiful big mouth?--That makes it something!"

"Never mind about the word; tell me what next will happen to Blunty."

"He will wake one morning and find himself a giant--not like you, good giant, but like any other bad giant. You will hardly know him, but I will tell you which. He will think he has been a giant always, and will not know you, or any of us. The giants have lost themselves, Peony says, and that is why they never smile. I wonder whether they are not glad because they are bad, or bad because they are not glad. But they can't be glad when they have no babies! I wonder what BAD means, good giant!"

"I wish I knew no more about it than you!" I returned. "But I try to be good, and mean to keep on trying."

"So do I--and that is how I know you are good."

A long pause followed.

"Then you do not know where the babies come from into the wood?" I said, making one attempt more.

"There is nothing to know there," she answered. "They are in the wood; they grow there."

"Then how is it you never find one before it is quite grown?" I asked.

She knitted her brows and was silent a moment:

"They're not there till they're finished," she said.

"It is a pity the little sillies can't speak till they've forgotten everything they had to tell!" I remarked.

"Little Tolma, the last before this baby, looked as if she had something to tell, when I found her under a beech-tree, sucking her thumb, but she hadn't. She only looked up at me--oh, so sweetly! SHE will never go bad and grow big! When they begin to grow big they care for nothing but bigness; and when they cannot grow any bigger, they try to grow fatter. The bad giants are very proud of being fat."

"So they are in my world," I said; "only they do not say FAT there, they say RICH."

"In one of their houses," continued Lona, "sits the biggest and fattest of them--so proud that nobody can see him; and the giants go to his house at certain times, and call out to him, and tell him how fat he is, and beg him to make them strong to eat more and grow fat like him."

CHAPTER XIV

A CRISIS

For a time I had no desire save to spend my life with the Little Ones. But soon other thoughts and feelings began to influence me. First awoke the vague sense that I ought to be doing something; that I was not meant for the fattening of boors! Then it came to me that I was in a marvellous world, of which it was assuredly my business to discover the ways and laws; and that, if I would do anything in return for the children's goodness, I must learn more about them than they could tell me, and to that end must be free. Surely, I thought, no suppression of their growth can be essential to their loveliness and truth and purity! Not in any world could the possibility exist of such a discord between constitution and its natural outcome! Life and law cannot be so at variance that perfection must be gained by thwarting development! But the growth of the Little Ones WAS arrested! something interfered with it: what was it? Lona seemed the eldest of them, yet not more than fifteen, and had been long in charge of a multitude, in semblance and mostly in behaviour merest children, who regarded her as their mother! Were they growing at all? I doubted it. Of time they had scarcely the idea; of their own age they knew nothing! Lona herself thought she had lived always! Full of wisdom and empty of knowledge, she was at once their Love and their Law! But what seemed to me her ignorance might in truth be my own lack of insight! Her one anxiety plainly was, that her Little Ones should not grow, and change into bad giants! Their "good giant" was bound to do his best for them: without more knowledge of their nature, and some knowledge of their history, he could do nothing, and must therefore leave them! They would only be as they were before; they had in no way become dependent on me; they were still my protectors, I was not theirs; my presence but brought them more in danger of their idiotic neighbours! I longed to teach them many things: I must first understand more of those I would teach! Knowledge no doubt made bad people worse, but it must make good people better! I was convinced they would learn mathematics; and might they not be taught to write down the dainty melodies they murmured and forgot?

The conclusion was, that I must rise and continue my travels, in the hope of coming upon some elucidation of the fortunes and destiny of the bewitching little creatures.

My design, however, would not so soon have passed into action, but for what now occurred.

To prepare them for my temporary absence, I was one day telling them while at work that I would long ago have left the bad giants, but that I loved the Little Ones so much--when, as by one accord, they came rushing and crowding upon me; they scrambled over each other and up the tree and dropped on my head, until I was nearly smothered. With three very little ones in my arms, one on each shoulder clinging to my neck, one standing straight up on my head, four or five holding me fast by the legs, others grappling my body and arms, and a multitude climbing and descending upon these, I was helpless as one overwhelmed by lava. Absorbed in the merry struggle, not one of them saw my tyrant coming until he was almost upon me. With just one cry of "Take care, good giant!" they ran from me like mice, they dropped from me like hedgehogs, they flew from me up the tree like squirrels, and the same moment, sharp round the stem came the bad giant, and dealt me such a blow on the head with a stick that I fell to the ground. The children told me afterwards that they sent him "such a many bumps of big apples and stones" that he was frightened, and ran blundering home.

When I came to myself it was night. Above me were a few pale stars that expected the moon. I thought I was alone. My head ached badly, and I was terribly athirst.

I turned wearily on my side. The moment my ear touched the ground, I heard the gushing and gurgling of water, and the soft noises made me groan with longing. At once I was amid a multitude of silent children, and delicious little fruits began to visit my lips. They came and came until my thirst was gone.

Then I was aware of sounds I had never heard there before; the air was full of little sobs.

I tried to sit up. A pile of small bodies instantly heaped itself at my back. Then I struggled to my feet, with much pushing and pulling from the Little Ones, who were wonderfully strong for their size.

"You must go away, good giant," they said. "When the bad giants see you hurt, they will all trample on you."

"I think I must," I answered.

"Go and grow strong, and come again," they said.

"I will," I replied--and sat down.

"Indeed you must go at once!" whispered Lona, who had been supporting me, and now knelt beside me.

"I listened at his door," said one of the bigger boys, "and heard the bad giant say to his wife that he had found you idle, talking to a lot of moles and squirrels, and when he beat you, they tried to kill him. He said you were a wizard, and they must knock you, or they would have no peace."

"I will go at once," I said, "and come back as soon as I have found out

"We have never gone so far from our trees before," they said. "Now mind you watch how you go, that you may see inside your eyes how to come back to us."

"And beware of the giant-woman that lives in the desert," said one of the bigger girls as they were turning, "I suppose you have heard of her!"

"No," I answered.

"Then take care not to go near her. She is called the Cat-woman. She is awfully ugly--AND SCRATCHES."

As soon as the bigger ones stopped, the smaller had begun to run back. The others now looked at me gravely for a moment, and then walked slowly away. Last to leave me, Lona held up the baby to be kissed, gazed in my eyes, whispered, "The Cat-woman will not hurt YOU," and went without another word. I stood a while, gazing after them through the moonlight, then turned and, with a heavy heart, began my solitary journey. Soon the laughter of the Little Ones overtook me, like sheep-bells innumerable, rippling the air, and echoing in the rocks about me. I turned again, and again gazed after them: they went gamboling along, with never a care in their sweet souls. But Lona walked apart with her baby.

Pondering as I went, I recalled many traits of my little friends.

Once when I suggested that they should leave the country of the bad giants, and go with me to find another, they answered, "But that would be to NOT ourselves!"--so strong in them was the love of place that their country seemed essential to their very being! Without ambition or fear, discomfort or greed, they had no motive to desire any change; they knew of nothing amiss; and, except their babies, they had never had a chance of helping any one but myself:--How were they to grow? But again, Why should they grow? In seeking to improve their conditions, might I not do them harm, and only harm? To enlarge their minds after the notions of my world--might it not be to distort and weaken them? Their fear of growth as a possible start for gianthood might be instinctive!

The part of philanthropist is indeed a dangerous one; and the man who would do his neighbour good must first study how not to do him evil, and must begin by pulling the beam out of his own eye.

CHAPTER XV

A STRANGE HOSTESS

I travelled on attended by the moon. As usual she was full--I had never seen her other--and to-night as she sank I thought I perceived something like a smile on her countenance.

When her under edge was a little below the horizon, there appeared in the middle of her disc, as if it had been painted upon it, a cottage, through the open door and window of which she shone; and with the sight came the conviction that I was expected there. Almost immediately the moon was gone, and the cottage had vanished; the night was rapidly growing dark, and my way being across a close succession of small ravines, I resolved to remain where I was and expect the morning. I stretched myself, therefore, in a sandy hollow, made my supper off the fruits the children had given me at parting, and was soon asleep.

I woke suddenly, saw above me constellations unknown to my former world, and had lain for a while gazing at them, when I became aware of a figure seated on the ground a little way from and above me. I was startled, as one is on discovering all at once that he is not alone. The figure was between me and the sky, so that I saw its outline well. From where I lay low in the hollow, it seemed larger than human.

It moved its head, and then first I saw that its back was toward me.

"Will you not come with me?" said a sweet, mellow voice, unmistakably a woman's.

Wishing to learn more of my hostess,

"I thank you," I replied, "but I am not uncomfortable here. Where would you have me go? I like sleeping in the open air."

"There is no hurt in the air," she returned; "but the creatures that roam the night in these parts are not such as a man would willingly have about him while he sleeps."

"I have not been disturbed," I said.

"No; I have been sitting by you ever since you lay down."

"That is very kind of you! How came you to know I was here? Why do you show me such favour?"

"I saw you," she answered, still with her back to me, "in the light of the moon, just as she went down. I see badly in the day, but at night perfectly. The shadow of my house would have hidden you, but both its doors were open. I was out on the waste, and saw you go into this hollow. You were asleep, however, before I could reach you, and I was not willing to disturb you. People are frightened if I come on them suddenly. They call me the Cat-woman. It is not my name."

I remembered what the children had told me--that she was very ugly, and scratched. But her voice was gentle, and its tone a little apologetic: she could not be a bad giantess!

"You shall not hear it from me," I answered, "Please tell me what I MAY call you!"

"When you know me, call me by the name that seems to you to fit me," she replied: "that will tell me what sort you are. People do not often give me the right one. It is well when they do."

"I suppose, madam, you live in the cottage I saw in the heart of the moon?"

"I do. I live there alone, except when I have visitors. It is a poor place, but I do what I can for my guests, and sometimes their sleep is sweet to them."

Her voice entered into me, and made me feel strangely still.

"I will go with you, madam," I said, rising.

She rose at once, and without a glance behind her led the way. I could see her just well enough to follow. She was taller than myself, but not so tall as I had thought her. That she never turned her face to me made me curious--nowise apprehensive, her voice rang so true. But how was I to fit her with a name who could not see her? I strove to get alongside of her, but failed: when I quickened my pace she quickened hers, and kept easily ahead of me. At length I did begin to grow a little afraid. Why was she so careful not to be seen? Extraordinary ugliness would account for it: she might fear terrifying me! Horror of an inconceivable monstrosity began to assail me: was I following through the dark an unheard of hideousness? Almost I repented of having accepted her hospitality.

Neither spoke, and the silence grew unbearable. I MUST break it!

"I want to find my way," I said, "to a place I have heard of, but whose name I have not yet learned. Perhaps you can tell it me!"

"Describe it, then, and I will direct you. The stupid Bags know nothing, and the careless little Lovers forget almost everything."

"Where do those live?"

"You are just come from them!"

"I never heard those names before!"

"You would not hear them. Neither people knows its own name!"

"Strange!"

"Perhaps so! but hardly any one anywhere knows his own name! It would make many a fine gentleman stare to hear himself addressed by what is really his name!"

I held my peace, beginning to wonder what my name might be.

"What now do you fancy yours?" she went on, as if aware of my thought. "But, pardon me, it is a matter of no consequence."

I had actually opened my mouth to answer her, when I discovered that my name was gone from me. I could not even recall the first letter of it! This was the second time I had been asked my name and could not tell it!

"Never mind," she said; "it is not wanted. Your real name, indeed, is written on your forehead, but at present it whirls about so irregularly that nobody can read it. I will do my part to steady it. Soon it will go slower, and, I hope, settle at last."

This startled me, and I was silent.

We had left the channels and walked a long time, but no sign of the cottage yet appeared.

"The Little Ones told me," I said at length, "of a smooth green country, pleasant to the feet!"

"Yes?" she returned.

"They told me too of a girl giantess that was queen somewhere: is that her country?"

"There is a city in that grassy land," she replied, "where a woman is princess. The city is called Bulika. But certainly the princess is not a girl! She is older than this world, and came to it from yours--with a terrible history, which is not over yet. She is an evil person, and prevails much with the Prince of the Power of the Air. The people of Bulika were formerly simple folk, tilling the ground and pasturing sheep. She came among them, and they received her hospitably. She taught them to dig for diamonds and opals and sell them to strangers, and made them give up tillage and pasturage and build a city. One day they found a huge snake and killed it; which so enraged her that she declared herself their princess, and became terrible to them. The name of the country at that time was THE LAND OF WATERS; for the dry channels, of which you have crossed so many, were then overflowing with live torrents; and the valley, where now the Bags and the Lovers have their fruit-trees, was a lake that received a great part of them. But the wicked princess gathered up in her lap what she could of the water over the whole country, closed it in an egg, and carried it away. Her lap, however, would not hold more than half of it; and the instant she was gone, what she had not yet taken fled away underground, leaving the country as dry and dusty as her own heart. Were it not for the waters under it, every living thing would long ago have perished from it. For where no water is, no rain falls; and where no rain falls, no springs rise. Ever since then, the princess has lived in Bulika, holding the inhabitants in constant terror, and doing what she can to keep them from multiplying. Yet they boast and believe themselves a prosperous, and certainly are a self-satisfied people--good at bargaining and buying, good at selling and cheating; holding well together for a common interest, and utterly treacherous where interests clash; proud of their princess and her power, and despising every one they get the better of; never doubting themselves the most honourable of all the nations, and each man counting himself better than any other. The depth of their worthlessness and height of their vainglory no one can understand who has not been there to see, who has not learned to know the miserable misgoverned and self-deceived creatures."

"I thank you, madam. And now, if you please, will you tell me something about the Little Ones--the Lovers? I long heartily to serve them. Who and what are they? and how do they come to be there? Those children are the greatest wonder I have found in this world of wonders."

"In Bulika you may, perhaps, get some light on those matters. There is an ancient poem in the library of the palace, I am told, which of course no one there can read, but in which it is plainly written that after the Lovers have gone through great troubles and learned their own name, they will fill the land, and make the giants their slaves."

"By that time they will have grown a little, will they not?" I said.

"Yes, they will have grown; yet I think too they will not have grown. It is possible to grow and not to grow, to grow less and to grow bigger, both at once--yes, even to grow by means of not growing!"

"Your words are strange, madam!" I rejoined. "But I have heard it said that some words, because they mean more, appear to mean less!"

"That is true, and such words HAVE to be understood. It were well for the princess of Bulika if she heard what the very silence of the land is shouting in her ears all day long! But she is far too clever to understand anything."

"Then I suppose, when the little Lovers are grown, their land will have water again?"

"Not exactly so: when they are thirsty enough, they will have water, and when they have water, they will grow. To grow, they must have water. And, beneath, it is flowing still."

"I have heard that water twice," I said; "--once when I lay down to wait for the moon--and when I woke the sun was shining! and once when I fell, all but killed by the bad giant. Both times came the voices of the water, and healed me."

The woman never turned her head, and kept always a little before me, but I could hear every word that left her lips, and her voice much reminded me of the woman's in the house of death. Much of what she said, I did not understand, and therefore cannot remember. But I forgot that I had ever been afraid of her.

We went on and on, and crossed yet a wide tract of sand before reaching the cottage. Its foundation stood in deep sand, but I could see that it was a rock. In character the cottage resembled the sexton's, but had thicker walls. The door, which was heavy and strong, opened

"My name is Mara," she answered.

Then I remembered the sexton and the little black cat.

"Some people," she went on, "take me for Lot's wife, lamenting over Sodom; and some think I am Rachel, weeping for her children; but I am neither of those."

"I thank you again, Mara," I said. "--May I lie here on your floor till the morning?"

"At the top of that stair," she answered, "you will find a bed--on which some have slept better than they expected, and some have waked all the night and slept all the next day. It is not a very soft one, but it is better than the sand--and there are no hyenas sniffing about it!"

The stair, narrow and steep, led straight up from the room to an unceiled and unpartitioned garret, with one wide, low dormer window. Close under the sloping roof stood a narrow bed, the sight of which with its white coverlet made me shiver, so vividly it recalled the couches in the chamber of death. On the table was a dry loaf, and beside it a cup of cold water. To me, who had tasted nothing but fruit for months, they were a feast.

"I must leave you in the dark," my hostess called from the bottom of the stair. "This lantern is all the light I have, and there are things to do to-night."

"It is of no consequence, thank you, madam," I returned. "To eat and drink, to lie down and sleep, are things that can be done in the dark."

"Rest in peace," she said.

I ate up the loaf, drank the water every drop, and laid myself down. The bed was hard, the covering thin and scanty, and the night cold: I dreamed that I lay in the chamber of death, between the warrior and the lady with the healing wound.

I woke in the middle of the night, thinking I heard low noises of wild animals.

"Creatures of the desert scenting after me, I suppose!" I said to myself, and, knowing I was safe, would have gone to sleep again. But that instant a rough purring rose to a howl under my window, and I sprang from my bed to see what sort of beast uttered it.

Before the door of the cottage, in the full radiance of the moon, a tall woman stood, clothed in white, with her back toward me. She was stooping over a large white animal like a panther, patting and stroking it with one hand, while with the other she pointed to the moon half-way

I said to myself that she was right--I would not willingly be her guest a second time! but immediately my heart rebuked me, and I had scarce crossed the threshold when I turned again.

She stood in the middle of the room; her white garments lay like foamy waves at her feet, and among them the swathings of her face: it was lovely as a night of stars. Her great gray eyes looked up to heaven; tears were flowing down her pale cheeks. She reminded me not a little of the sexton's wife, although the one looked as if she had not wept for thousands of years, and the other as if she wept constantly behind the wrappings of her beautiful head. Yet something in the very eyes that wept seemed to say, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

I had bowed my head for a moment, about to kneel and beg her forgiveness, when, looking up in the act, I found myself outside a doorless house. I went round and round it, but could find no entrance.

I had stopped under one of the windows, on the point of calling aloud my repentant confession, when a sudden wailing, howling scream invaded my ears, and my heart stood still. Something sprang from the window above my head, and lighted beyond me. I turned, and saw a large gray cat, its hair on end, shooting toward the river-bed. I fell with my face in the sand, and seemed to hear within the house the gentle sobbing of one who suffered but did not repent.

CHAPTER XVI

A GRUESOME DANCE

I rose to resume my journey, and walked many a desert mile. How I longed for a mountain, or even a tall rock, from whose summit I might see across the dismal plain or the dried-up channels to some bordering hope! Yet what could such foresight have availed me? That which is within a man, not that which lies beyond his vision, is the main factor in what is about to befall him: the operation upon him is the event. Foreseeing is not understanding, else surely the prophecy latent in man would come oftener to the surface!

The sun was half-way to the horizon when I saw before me a rugged rocky ascent; but ere I reached it my desire to climb was over, and I longed to lie down. By that time the sun was almost set, and the air had begun to grow dark. At my feet lay a carpet of softest, greenest moss, couch for a king: I threw myself upon it, and weariness at once began to ebb, for, the moment my head was down, the third time I heard below me many waters, playing broken airs and ethereal harmonies with the stones of their buried channels. Loveliest chaos of music-stuff the harp aquarian kept sending up to my ears! What might not a Händel have done with that ever-recurring gurgle and bell-like drip, to the mingling and mutually destructive melodies their common refrain!

As I lay listening, my eyes went wandering up and down the rocky slope abrupt above me, reading on its face the record that down there, ages ago, rushed a cataract, filling the channels that had led me to its foot. My heart swelled at the thought of the splendid tumult, where the waves danced revelling in helpless fall, to mass their music in one organ-roar below. But soon the hidden brooks lulled me to sleep, and their lullabies mingled with my dreams.

I woke before the sun, and eagerly climbed to see what lay beyond. Alas, nothing but a desert of finest sand! Not a trace was left of the river that had plunged adown the rocks! The powdery drift had filled its course to the level of the dreary expanse! As I looked back I saw that the river had divided into two branches as it fell, that whose bank I had now followed to the foot of the rocky scaur, and that which first I crossed to the Evil Wood. The wood I descried between the two on the far horizon. Before me and to the left, the desert stretched beyond my vision, but far to the right I could see a lift in the sky-line, giving hope of the forest to which my hostess had directed me.

I sat down, and sought in my pocket the half-loaf I had brought with me--then first to understand what my hostess had meant concerning it. Verily the bread was not for the morrow: it had shrunk and hardened to a stone! I threw it away, and set out again.

About noon I came to a few tamarisk and juniper trees, and then to a few stunted firs. As I went on, closer thickets and larger firs met me, and at length I was in just such a forest of pines and other trees as that in which the Little Ones found their babies, and believed I had returned upon a farther portion of the same. But what mattered WHERE while EVERYWHERE was the same as NOWHERE! I had not yet, by doing something in it, made ANYWHERE into a place! I was not yet alive; I was only dreaming I lived! I was but a consciousness with an outlook! Truly I had been nothing else in the world I had left, but now I knew the fact! I said to myself that if in this forest I should catch the faint gleam of the mirror, I would turn far aside lest it should entrap me unawares, and give me back to my old existence: here I might learn to be something by doing something! I could not endure the thought of going back, with so many beginnings and not an end achieved. The Little Ones would meet what fate was appointed them; the awful witch I should never meet; the dead would ripen and arise without me; I should but wake to know that I had dreamed, and that all my going was nowhither! I would rather go on and on than come to such a close!

I went deeper into the wood: I was weary, and would rest in it.

The trees were now large, and stood in regular, almost geometric, fashion, with roomy spaces between. There was little undergrowth, and I could see a long way in every direction. The forest was like a great church, solemn and silent and empty, for I met nothing on two feet or four that day. Now and then, it is true, some swift thing, and again some slow thing, would cross the space on which my eye happened that moment to settle; but it was always at some distance, and only enhanced the sense of wideness and vacancy. I heard a few birds, and saw plenty of butterflies, some of marvellously gorgeous colouring and combinations of colour, some of a pure and dazzling whiteness.

Coming to a spot where the pines stood farther apart and gave room for flowering shrubs, and hoping it a sign of some dwelling near, I took the direction where yet more and more roses grew, for I was hungry after the voice and face of my kind--after any live soul, indeed, human or not, which I might in some measure understand. What a hell of horror, I thought, to wander alone, a bare existence never going out of itself, never widening its life in another life, but, bound with the cords of its poor peculiarities, lying an eternal prisoner in the dungeon of its own being! I began to learn that it was impossible to live for oneself even, save in the presence of others--then, alas, fearfully possible! evil was only through good! selfishness but a parasite on the tree of life! In my own world I had the habit of solitary song; here not a crooning murmur ever parted my lips! There I sang without thinking; here I thought without singing! there I had never had a bosom-friend; here the affection of an idiot would be divinely welcome! "If only I had a dog to love!" I sighed--and regarded with wonder my past self, which preferred the company of book or pen to that of man or woman; which, if the author of a tale I was enjoying appeared, would wish him away that I might return to his story. I had chosen the dead rather than the living, the thing thought rather than the thing thinking! "Any man," I said now, "is more than the greatest of books!" I had not cared for my live brothers and sisters, and now I was left without even the dead to comfort me!

The wood thinned yet more, and the pines grew yet larger, sending up huge stems, like columns eager to support the heavens. More trees of other kinds appeared; the forest was growing richer! The roses wore now trees, and their flowers of astonishing splendour.

Suddenly I spied what seemed a great house or castle; but its forms were so strangely indistinct, that I could not be certain it was more than a chance combination of tree-shapes. As I drew nearer, its lines yet held together, but neither they nor the body of it grew at all more definite; and when at length I stood in front of it, I remained as doubtful of its nature as before. House or castle habitable, it certainly was not; it might be a ruin overgrown with ivy and roses! Yet of building hid in the foliage, not the poorest wall-remnant could I discern. Again and again I seemed to descry what must be building, but it always vanished before closer inspection. Could it be, I pondered, that the ivy had embraced a huge edifice and consumed it, and its interlaced branches retained the shapes of the walls it had assimilated?--I could be sure of nothing concerning the appearance.

Before me was a rectangular vacancy--the ghost of a doorway without a door: I stepped through it, and found myself in an open space like a great hall, its floor covered with grass and flowers, its walls and roof of ivy and vine, mingled with roses.

There could be no better place in which to pass the night! I gathered a quantity of withered leaves, laid them in a corner, and threw myself upon them. A red sunset filled the hall, the night was warm, and my couch restful; I lay gazing up at the live ceiling, with its tracery of branches and twigs, its clouds of foliage, and peeping patches of loftier roof. My eyes went wading about as if tangled in it, until the sun was down, and the sky beginning to grow dark. Then the red roses turned black, and soon the yellow and white alone were visible. When they vanished, the stars came instead, hanging in the leaves like live topazes, throbbing and sparkling and flashing many colours: I was canopied with a tree from Aladdin's cave!

Then I discovered that it was full of nests, whence tiny heads, nearly indistinguishable, kept popping out with a chirp or two, and disappearing again. For a while there were rustlings and stirrings and little prayers; but as the darkness grew, the small heads became still, and at last every feathered mother had her brood quiet under her wings, the talk in the little beds was over, and God's bird-nursery at rest beneath the waves of sleep. Once more a few flutterings made me look up: an owl went sailing across. I had only a glimpse of him, but several times felt the cool wafture of his silent wings. The mother birds did not move again; they saw that he was looking for mice, not children.

About midnight I came wide awake, roused by a revelry, whose noises were yet not loud. Neither were they distant; they were close to me, but attenuate. My eyes were so dazzled, however, that for a while I could see nothing; at last they came to themselves.

I was lying on my withered leaves in the corner of a splendid hall. Before me was a crowd of gorgeously dressed men and gracefully robed women, none of whom seemed to see me. In dance after dance they vaguely embodied the story of life, its meetings, its passions, its partings. A student of Shakspere, I had learned something of every dance alluded to in his plays, and hence partially understood several of those I now saw--the minuet, the pavin, the hey, the coranto, the lavolta. The dancers were attired in fashion as ancient as their dances.

A moon had risen while I slept, and was shining through the countless-windowed roof; but her light was crossed by so many shadows that at first I could distinguish almost nothing of the faces of the multitude; I could not fail, however, to perceive that there was something odd about them: I sat up to see them better.--Heavens! could I call them faces? They were skull fronts! --hard, gleaming bone, bare jaws, truncated noses, lipless teeth which could no more take part in any smile! Of these, some flashed set and white and murderous; others were clouded with decay, broken and gapped, coloured of the earth in which they seemed so long to have lain! Fearfuller yet, the eye-sockets were not empty; in each was a lidless living eye! In those wrecks of faces, glowed or flashed or sparkled eyes of every colour, shape, and expression. The beautiful, proud eye, dark and lustrous, condescending to whatever it rested upon, was the more terrible; the lovely, languishing eye, the more repulsive; while the dim, sad eyes, less at variance with their setting, were sad exceedingly, and drew the heart in spite of the horror out of which they gazed.

I rose and went among the apparitions, eager to understand something of their being and belongings. Were they souls, or were they and their rhythmic motions but phantasms of what had been? By look nor by gesture, not by slightest break in the measure, did they show themselves aware of me; I was not present to them: how much were they in relation to each other? Surely they saw their companions as I saw them! Or was each only dreaming itself and the rest? Did they know each how they appeared to the others--a death with living eyes? Had they used their faces, not for communication, not to utter thought and feeling, not to share existence with their neighbours, but to appear what they wished to appear, and conceal what they were? and, having made their faces masks, were they therefore deprived of those masks, and condemned to go without faces until they repented?

"How long must they flaunt their facelessness in faceless eyes?" I wondered. "How long will the frightful punition endure? Have they at length begun to love and be wise? Have they yet yielded to the shame that has found them?"

I heard not a word, saw not a movement of one naked mouth. Were they because of lying bereft of speech? With their eyes they spoke as if longing to be understood: was it truth or was it falsehood that spoke in their eyes? They seemed to know one another: did they see one skull beautiful, and another plain? Difference must be there, and they had had long study of skulls!

My body was to theirs no obstacle: was I a body, and were they but forms? or was I but a form, and were they bodies? The moment one of the dancers came close against me, that moment he or she was on the other side of me, and I could tell, without seeing, which, whether man or woman, had passed through my house.

On many of the skulls the hair held its place, and however dressed, or in itself however beautiful, to my eyes looked frightful on the bones of the forehead and temples. In such case, the outer ear often remained also, and at its tip, the jewel of the ear as Sidney calls it, would hang, glimmering, gleaming, or sparkling, pearl or opal or diamond--under the night of brown or of raven locks, the sunrise of golden ripples, or the moonshine of pale, interclouded, fluffy cirri--lichenous all on the ivory-white or damp-yellow naked bone. I looked down and saw the daintily domed instep; I looked up and saw the plump shoulders basing the spring of the round full neck--which withered at half-height to the fluted shaft of a gibbose cranium.

The music became wilder, the dance faster and faster; eyes flared and flashed, jewels twinkled and glittered, casting colour and fire on the pallid grins that glode through the hall, weaving a ghastly rhythmic woof in intricate maze of multitudinous motion, when sudden came a pause, and every eye turned to the same spot:--in the doorway stood a woman, perfect in form, in holding, and in hue, regarding the company as from the pedestal of a goddess, while the dancers stood "like one forbid," frozen to a new death by the vision of a life that killed. "Dead things, I live!" said her scornful glance. Then, at once, like leaves in which an instant wind awakes, they turned each to another, and broke afresh into melodious consorted motion, a new expression in their eyes, late solitary, now filled with the interchange of a common triumph. "Thou also," they seemed to say, "wilt soon become weak as we! thou wilt soon become like unto us!" I turned mine again to the woman--and saw upon her side a small dark shadow.

She had seen the change in the dead stare; she looked down; she understood the talking eyes; she pressed both her lovely hands on the shadow, gave a smothered cry, and fled. The birds moved rustling in their nests, and a flash of joy lit up the eyes of the dancers, when suddenly a warm wind, growing in strength as it swept through the place, blew out every light. But the low moon yet glimmered on the horizon with "sick assay" to shine, and a turbid radiance yet gleamed from so many eyes, that I saw well enough what followed. As if each shape had been but a snow-image, it began to fall to pieces, ruining in the warm wind. In papery flakes the flesh peeled from its bones, dropping like soiled snow from under its garments; these fell fluttering in rags and strips, and the whole white skeleton, emerging from garment and flesh together, stood bare and lank amid the decay that littered the floor. A faint rattling shiver went through the naked company; pair after pair the lamping eyes went out; and the darkness grew round me with the loneliness. For a moment the leaves were still swept fluttering all one way; then the wind ceased, and the owl floated silent through the silent night.

Not for a moment had I been afraid. It is true that whoever would cross the threshold of any world, must leave fear behind him; but, for myself, I could claim no part in its absence. No conscious courage was operant in me; simply, I was not afraid. I neither knew why I was not afraid, nor wherefore I might have been afraid. I feared not even fear--which of all dangers is the most dangerous.

I went out into the wood, at once to resume my journey. Another moon was rising, and I turned my face toward it.

CHAPTER XVII

A GROTESQUE TRAGEDY

I had not gone ten paces when I caught sight of a strange-looking object, and went nearer to know what it might be. I found it a mouldering carriage of ancient form, ruinous but still upright on its heavy wheels. On each side of the pole, still in its place, lay the skeleton of a horse; from their two grim white heads ascended the shrivelled reins to the hand of the skeleton-coachman seated on his tattered hammer-cloth; both doors had fallen away; within sat two skeletons, each leaning back in its corner.

Even as I looked, they started awake, and with a cracking rattle of bones, each leaped from the door next it. One fell and lay; the other stood a moment, its structure shaking perilously; then with difficulty, for its joints were stiff, crept, holding by the back of the carriage, to the opposite side, the thin leg-bones seeming hardly strong enough to carry its weight, where, kneeling by the other, it sought to raise it, almost falling itself again in the endeavour.

The prostrate one rose at length, as by a sudden effort, to the sitting posture. For a few moments it turned its yellowish skull to this side and that; then, heedless of its neighbour, got upon its feet by grasping the spokes of the hind wheel. Half erected thus, it stood with its back to the other, both hands holding one of its knee-joints. With little less difficulty and not a few contortions, the kneeling one rose next, and addressed its companion.

"Have you hurt yourself, my lord?" it said, in a voice that sounded far-off, and ill-articulated as if blown aside by some spectral wind.

"Yes, I have," answered the other, in like but rougher tone. "You would do nothing to help me, and this cursed knee is out!"

"I did my best, my lord."

"No doubt, my lady, for it was bad! I thought I should never find my feet again!--But, bless my soul, madam! are you out in your bones?"

She cast a look at herself.

"I have nothing else to be out in," she returned; "--and YOU at least cannot complain! But what on earth does it mean? Am I dreaming?"

"YOU may be dreaming, madam--I cannot tell; but this knee of mine forbids me the grateful illusion.--Ha! I too, I perceive, have nothing to walk in but bones!--Not so unbecoming to a man, however! I trust to goodness they are not MY bones! every one aches worse than another, and this loose knee worst of all! The bed must have been damp--and I too drunk to know it!"

"Probably, my lord of Cokayne!"

"What! what!--You make me think I too am dreaming--aches and all! How do YOU know the title my roistering bullies give me? I don't remember you!--Anyhow, you have no right to take liberties! My name is--I am lord----tut, tut! What do you call me when I'm--I mean when you are sober? I cannot--at the moment,--Why, what IS my name?--I must have been VERY drunk when I went to bed! I often am!"

"You come so seldom to mine, that I do not know, my lord; but I may take your word for THAT!"

"I hope so!"

"--if for nothing else!" "Hoity toity! I never told you a lie in my life!"

"You never told me anything but lies."

"Upon my honour!--Why, I never saw the woman before!"

"You knew me well enough to lie to, my lord!"

"I do seem to begin to dream I have met you before, but, upon my oath, there is nothing to know you by! Out of your clothes, who is to tell who you may not be?--One thing I MAY swear--that I never saw you so much undressed before!--By heaven, I have no recollection of you!"

"I am glad to hear it: my recollections of you are the less distasteful!--Good morning, my lord!"

She turned away, hobbled, clacking, a few paces, and stood again.

"You are just as heartless as--as--any other woman, madam!--Where in this hell of a place shall I find my valet?--What was the cursed name I used to call the fool?"

He turned his bare noddle this way and that on its creaking pivot, still holding his knee with both hands.

"I will be your valet for once, my lord," said the lady, turning once more to him. "--What can I do for you? It is not easy to tell!"

"Tie my leg on, of course, you fool! Can't you see it is all but off? Heigho, my dancing days!"

She looked about with her eyeless sockets and found a piece of fibrous grass, with which she proceeded to bind together the adjoining parts that had formed the knee. When she had done, he gave one or two carefully tentative stamps.

"You used to stamp rather differently, my lord!" she said, as she rose from her knees.

"Eh? what!--Now I look at you again, it seems to me I used to hate you!--Eh?"

"Naturally, my lord! You hated a good many people!--your wife, of course, among the rest!"

"Ah, I begin, I be-gin---- But--I must have been a long time somewhere!--I really forget!--There! your damned, miserable bit of grass is breaking!--We used to get on PRETTY well together--eh?"

"Not that I remember, my lord. The only happy moments I had in your company were scattered over the first week of our marriage."

"Was that the way of it? Ha! ha!--Well, it's over now, thank goodness!"

"I wish I could believe it! Why were we sitting there in that carriage together? It wakes apprehension!"

"I think we were divorced, my lady!"

"Hardly enough: we are still together!"

"A sad truth, but capable of remedy: the forest seems of some extent!"

"I doubt! I doubt!"

"I am sorry I cannot think of a compliment to pay you--without lying, that is. To judge by your figure and complexion you have lived hard since I saw you last! I cannot surely be QUITE so naked as your ladyship!--I beg your pardon, madam! I trust you will take it I am but jesting in a dream! It is of no consequence, however; dreaming or waking, all's one--all merest appearance! You can't be certain of anything, and that's as good as knowing there is nothing! Life may teach any fool that!"

"It has taught me the fool I was to love you!"

"You were not the only fool to do that! Women had a trick of falling in love with me:--I had forgotten that you were one of them!" "I did love you, my lord--a little--at one time!"

"Ah, there was your mistake, my lady! You should have loved me much, loved me devotedly, loved me savagely--loved me eternally! Then I should have tired of you the sooner, and not hated you so much afterward!--But let bygones be bygones!--WHERE are we? Locality is the question! To be or not to be, is NOT the question!"

"We are in the other world, I presume!"

"Granted!--but in which or what sort of other world? This can't be hell!"

"It must: there's marriage in it! You and I are damned in each other."

"Then I'm not like Othello, damned in a fair wife!--Oh, I remember my Shakspeare, madam!"

She picked up a broken branch that had fallen into a bush, and steadying herself with it, walked away, tossing her little skull.

"Give that stick to me," cried her late husband; "I want it more than you."

She returned him no answer.

"You mean to make me beg for it?"

"Not at all, my lord. I mean to keep it," she replied, continuing her slow departure.

"Give it me at once; I mean to have it! I require it."

"Unfortunately, I think I require it myself!" returned the lady, walking a little quicker, with a sharper cracking of her joints and clinking of her bones.

He started to follow her, but nearly fell: his knee-grass had burst, and with an oath he stopped, grasping his leg again.

"Come and tie it up properly!" he would have thundered, but he only piped and whistled!

She turned and looked at him.

"Come and tie it up instantly!" he repeated.

She walked a step or two farther from him.

"I swear I will not touch you!" he cried.

"Swear on, my lord! there is no one here to believe you. But, pray, do not lose your temper, or you will shake yourself to pieces, and where to find string enough to tie up all your crazy joints, is more than I can tell."

She came back, and knelt once more at his side--first, however, laying the stick in dispute beyond his reach and within her own.

The instant she had finished retying the joint, he made a grab at her, thinking, apparently, to seize her by the hair; but his hard fingers slipped on the smooth poll.

"Disgusting!" he muttered, and laid hold of her upper arm-bone.

"You will break it!" she said, looking up from her knees.

"I will, then!" he answered, and began to strain at it.

"I shall not tie your leg again the next time it comes loose!" she threatened.

He gave her arm a vicious twist, but happily her bones were in better condition than his. She stretched her other hand toward the broken branch.

"That's right: reach me the stick!" he grinned.

She brought it round with such a swing that one of the bones of the sounder leg snapped. He fell, choking with curses. The lady laughed.

"Now you will have to wear splints always!" she said; "such dry bones never mend!"

"You devil!" he cried.

"At your service, my lord! Shall I fetch you a couple of wheel-spokes? Neat--but heavy, I fear!"

He turned his bone-face aside, and did not answer, but lay and groaned. I marvelled he had not gone to pieces when he fell. The lady rose and walked away--not all ungracefully, I thought.

"What can come of it?" I said to myself. "These are too wretched for any world, and this cannot be hell, for the Little Ones are in it, and the sleepers too! What can it all mean? Can things ever come right for skeletons?"

"There are words too big for you and me: ALL is one of them, and EVER is another," said a voice near me which I knew.

I looked about, but could not see the speaker.

"You are not in hell," it resumed. "Neither am I in hell. But those skeletons are in hell!"

Ere he ended I caught sight of the raven on the bough of a beech, right over my head. The same moment he left it, and alighting on the ground, stood there, the thin old man of the library, with long nose and long coat.

"The male was never a gentleman," he went on, "and in the bony stage of retrogression, with his skeleton through his skin, and his character outside his manners, does not look like one. The female is less vulgar, and has a little heart. But, the restraints of society removed, you see them now just as they are and always were!"

"Tell me, Mr. Raven, what will become of them," I said.

"We shall see," he replied. "In their day they were the handsomest couple at court; and now, even in their dry bones, they seem to regard their former repute as an inalienable possession; to see their faces, however, may yet do something for them! They felt themselves rich too while they had pockets, but they have already begun to feel rather pinched! My lord used to regard my lady as a worthless encumbrance, for he was tired of her beauty and had spent her money; now he needs her to cobble his joints for him! These changes have roots of hope in them. Besides, they cannot now get far away from each other, and they see none else of their own kind: they must at last grow weary of their mutual repugnance, and begin to love one another! for love, not hate, is deepest in what Love `loved into being.'"

"I saw many more of their kind an hour ago, in the hall close by!" I said.

"Of their kind, but not of their sort," he answered. "For many years these will see none such as you saw last night. Those are centuries in advance of these. You saw that those could even dress themselves a little! It is true they cannot yet retain their clothes so long as they would--only, at present, for a part of the night; but they are pretty steadily growing more capable, and will by and by develop faces; for every grain of truthfulness adds a fibre to the show of their humanity. Nothing but truth can appear; and whatever is must seem."

"Are they upheld by this hope?" I asked.

"They are upheld by hope, but they do not in the least know their hope; to understand it, is yet immeasurably beyond them," answered Mr. Raven.

His unexpected appearance had caused me no astonishment. I was like a child, constantly wondering, and surprised at nothing.

"Did you come to find me, sir?" I asked.

"Not at all," he replied. "I have no anxiety about you. Such as you always come back to us."

"Tell me, please, who am I such as?" I said.

"I cannot make my friend the subject of conversation," he answered, with a smile.

"But when that friend is present!" I urged.

"I decline the more strongly," he rejoined.

"But when that friend asks you!" I persisted.

"Then most positively I refuse," he returned.

"Why?"

"Because he and I would be talking of two persons as if they were one and the same. Your consciousness of yourself and my knowledge of you are far apart!"

The lapels of his coat flew out, and the lappets lifted, and I thought the metamorphosis of HOMO to CORVUS was about to take place before my eyes. But the coat closed again in front of him, and he added, with seeming inconsequence,

"In this world never trust a person who has once deceived you. Above all, never do anything such a one may ask you to do."

"I will try to remember," I answered; "--but I may forget!"

"Then some evil that is good for you will follow."

"And if I remember?"

"Some evil that is not good for you, will not follow."

The old man seemed to sink to the ground, and immediately I saw the raven several yards from me, flying low and fast.

CHAPTER XVIII

DEAD OR ALIVE?

I went walking on, still facing the moon, who, not yet high, was staring straight into the forest. I did not know what ailed her, but she was dark and dented, like a battered disc of old copper, and looked dispirited and weary. Not a cloud was nigh to keep her company, and the stars were too bright for her. "Is this going to last for ever?" she seemed to say. She was going one way and I was going the other, yet through the wood we went a long way together. We did not commune much, for my eyes were on the ground; but her disconsolate look was fixed on me: I felt without seeing it. A long time we were together, I and the moon, walking side by side, she the dull shine, and I the live shadow.

Something on the ground, under a spreading tree, caught my eye with its whiteness, and I turned toward it. Vague as it was in the shadow of the foliage, it suggested, as I drew nearer, a human body. "Another skeleton!" I said to myself, kneeling and laying my hand upon it. A body it was, however, and no skeleton, though as nearly one as body could well be. It lay on its side, and was very cold-- not cold like a stone, but cold like that which was once alive, and is alive no more. The closer I looked at it, the oftener I touched it, the less it seemed possible it should be other than dead. For one bewildered moment, I fancied it one of the wild dancers, a ghostly Cinderella, perhaps, that had lost her way home, and perished in the strange night of an out-of-door world! It was quite naked, and so worn that, even in the shadow, I could, peering close, have counted without touching them, every rib in its side. All its bones, indeed, were as visible as if tight-covered with only a thin elastic leather. Its beautiful yet terrible teeth, unseemly disclosed by the retracted lips, gleamed ghastly through the dark. Its hair was longer than itself, thick and very fine to the touch, and black as night.

It was the body of a tall, probably graceful woman.--How had she come there? Not of herself, and already in such wasted condition, surely! Her strength must have failed her; she had fallen, and lain there until she died of hunger! But how, even so, could she be thus emaciated? And how came she to be naked? Where were the savages to strip and leave her? or what wild beasts would have taken her garments? That her body should have been left was not wonderful!

I rose to my feet, stood, and considered. I must not, could not let her lie exposed and forsaken! Natural reverence forbade it. Even the garment of a woman claims respect; her body it were impossible to leave uncovered! Irreverent eyes might look on it! Brutal claws might toss it about! Years would pass ere the friendly rains washed it into the soil!--But the ground was hard, almost solid with interlacing roots, and I had but my bare hands!

At first it seemed plain that she had not long been dead: there was not a sign of decay about her! But then what had the slow wasting of life left of her to decay?

Could she be still alive? Might she not? What if she were! Things went very strangely in this strange world! Even then there would be little chance of bringing her back, but I must know she was dead before I buried her!

As I left the forest-hall, I had spied in the doorway a bunch of ripe grapes, and brought it with me, eating as I came: a few were yet left on the stalk, and their juice might possibly revive her! Anyhow it was all I had with which to attempt her rescue! The mouth was happily a little open; but the head was in such an awkward position that, to move the body, I passed my arm under the shoulder on which it lay, when I found the pine-needles beneath it warm: she could not have been any time dead, and MIGHT still be alive, though I could discern no motion of the heart, or any indication that she breathed! One of her hands was clenched hard, apparently inclosing something small. I squeezed a grape into her mouth, but no swallowing followed.

To do for her all I could, I spread a thick layer of pine-needles and dry leaves, laid one of my garments over it, warm from my body, lifted her upon it, and covered her with my clothes and a great heap of leaves: I would save the little warmth left in her, hoping an increase to it when the sun came back. Then I tried another grape, but could perceive no slightest movement of mouth or throat.

"Doubt," I said to myself, "may be a poor encouragement to do anything, but it is a bad reason for doing nothing." So tight was the skin upon her bones that I dared not use friction.

I crept into the heap of leaves, got as close to her as I could, and took her in my arms. I had not much heat left in me, but what I had I would share with her! Thus I spent what remained of the night, sleepless, and longing for the sun. Her cold seemed to radiate into me, but no heat to pass from me to her.

Had I fled from the beautiful sleepers, I thought, each on her "dim, straight" silver couch, to lie alone with such a bedfellow! I had refused a lovely privilege: I was given over to an awful duty! Beneath the sad, slow-setting moon, I lay with the dead, and watched for the dawn.

The darkness had given way, and the eastern horizon was growing dimly clearer, when I caught sight of a motion rather than of anything that moved--not far from me, and close to the ground. It was the low undulating of a large snake, which passed me in an unswerving line. Presently appeared, making as it seemed for the same point, what I took for a roebuck-doe and her calf. Again a while, and two creatures like bear-cubs came, with three or four smaller ones behind them. The light was now growing so rapidly that when, a few minutes after, a troop of horses went trotting past, I could see that, although the largest of them were no bigger than the smallest Shetland pony, they must yet be full-grown, so perfect were they in form, and so much had they all the ways and action of great horses. They were of many breeds. Some seemed models of cart-horses, others of chargers, hunters, racers. Dwarf cattle and small elephants followed.

"Why are the children not here!" I said to myself. "The moment I am free of this poor woman, I must go back and fetch them!"

Where were the creatures going? What drew them? Was this an exodus, or a morning habit? I must wait for the sun! Till he came I must not leave the woman! I laid my hand on the body, and could not help thinking it felt a trifle warmer. It might have gained a little of the heat I had lost! it could hardly have generated any! What reason for hope there was had not grown less!

The forehead of the day began to glow, and soon the sun came peering up, as if to see for the first time what all this stir of a new world was about. At sight of his great innocent splendour, I rose full of life, strong against death. Removing the handkerchief I had put to protect the mouth and eyes from the pine-needles, I looked anxiously to see whether I had found a priceless jewel, or but its empty case.

The body lay motionless as when I found it. Then first, in the morning light, I saw how drawn and hollow was the face, how sharp were the bones under the skin, how every tooth shaped itself through the lips. The human garment was indeed worn to its threads, but the bird of heaven might yet be nestling within, might yet awake to motion and song!

But the sun was shining on her face! I re-arranged the handkerchief, laid a few leaves lightly over it, and set out to follow the creatures. Their main track was well beaten, and must have long been used--likewise many of the tracks that, joining it from both sides, merged in, and broadened it. The trees retreated as I went, and the grass grew thicker. Presently the forest was gone, and a wide expanse of loveliest green stretched away to the horizon. Through it, along the edge of the forest, flowed a small river, and to this the track led. At sight of the water a new though undefined hope sprang up in me. The stream looked everywhere deep, and was full to the brim, but nowhere more than a few yards wide. A bluish mist rose from it, vanishing as it rose. On the opposite side, in the plentiful grass, many small animals were feeding. Apparently they slept in the forest, and in the morning sought the plain, swimming the river to reach it. I knelt and would have drunk, but the water was hot, and had a strange metallic taste.

I leapt to my feet: here was the warmth I sought--the first necessity of life! I sped back to my helpless charge.

Without well considering my solitude, no one will understand what seemed to lie for me in the redemption of this woman from death. "Prove what she may," I thought with myself, "I shall at least be lonely no more!" I had found myself such poor company that now first I seemed to know what hope was. This blessed water would expel the cold death, and drown my desolation!

I bore her to the stream. Tall as she was, I found her marvellously light, her bones were so delicate, and so little covered them. I grew yet more hopeful when I found her so far from stiff that I could carry her on one arm, like a sleeping child, leaning against my shoulder. I went softly, dreading even the wind of my motion, and glad there was no other.

The water was too hot to lay her at once in it: the shock might scare from her the yet fluttering life! I laid her on the bank, and dipping one of my garments, began to bathe the pitiful form. So wasted was it that, save from the plentifulness and blackness of the hair, it was impossible even to conjecture whether she was young or old. Her eyelids were just not shut, which made her look dead the more: there was a crack in the clouds of her night, at which no sun shone through!

The longer I went on bathing the poor bones, the less grew my hope that they would ever again be clothed with strength, that ever those eyelids would lift, and a soul look out; still I kept bathing continuously, allowing no part time to grow cold while I bathed another; and gradually the body became so much warmer, that at last I ventured to submerge it: I got into the stream and drew it in, holding the face above the water, and letting the swift, steady current flow all about the rest. I noted, but was able to conclude nothing from the fact, that, for all the heat, the shut hand never relaxed its hold.

After about ten minutes, I lifted it out and laid it again on the bank, dried it, and covered it as well as I could, then ran to the forest for leaves.

The grass and soil were dry and warm; and when I returned I thought it had scarcely lost any of the heat the water had given it. I spread the leaves upon it, and ran for more--then for a third and a fourth freight.

I could now leave it and go to explore, in the hope of discovering some shelter. I ran up the stream toward some rocky hills I saw in that direction, which were not far off.

When I reached them, I found the river issuing full grown from a rock at the bottom of one of them. To my fancy it seemed to have run down a stair inside, an eager cataract, at every landing wild to get out, but only at the foot finding a door of escape.

It did not fill the opening whence it rushed, and I crept through into a little cave, where I learned that, instead of hurrying tumultuously down a stair, it rose quietly from the ground at the back like the base of a large column, and ran along one side, nearly filling a deep, rather narrow channel. I considered the place, and saw that, if I could find a few fallen boughs long enough to lie across the channel, and large enough to bear a little weight without bending much, I might, with smaller branches and plenty of leaves, make upon them a comfortable couch, which the stream under would keep constantly warm. Then I ran back to see how my charge fared.

She was lying as I had left her. The heat had not brought her to life, but neither had it developed anything to check farther hope. I got a few boulders out of the channel, and arranged them at her feet and on both sides of her.

Running again to the wood, I had not to search long ere I found some small boughs fit for my purpose--mostly of beech, their dry yellow leaves yet clinging to them. With these I had soon laid the floor of a bridge-bed over the torrent. I crossed the boughs with smaller branches, interlaced these with twigs, and buried all deep in leaves and dry moss.

When thus at length, after not a few journeys to the forest, I had completed a warm, dry, soft couch, I took the body once more, and set out with it for the cave. It was so light that now and then as I went I almost feared lest, when I laid it down, I should find it a skeleton after all; and when at last I did lay it gently on the pathless bridge, it was a greater relief to part with that fancy than with the weight. Once more I covered the body with a thick layer of leaves; and trying again to feed her with a grape, found to my joy that I could open the mouth a little farther. The grape, indeed, lay in it unheeded, but I hoped some of the juice might find its way down.

After an hour or two on the couch, she was no longer cold. The warmth of the brook had interpenetrated her frame--truly it was but a frame!--and she was warm to the touch;--not, probably, with the warmth of life, but with a warmth which rendered it more possible, if she were alive, that she might live. I had read of one in a trance lying motionless for weeks!

In that cave, day after day, night after night, seven long days and nights, I sat or lay, now waking now sleeping, but always watching. Every morning I went out and bathed in the hot stream, and every morning felt thereupon as if I had eaten and drunk--which experience gave me courage to lay her in it also every day. Once as I did so, a shadow of discoloration on her left side gave me a terrible shock, but the next morning it had vanished, and I continued the treatment-- every morning, after her bath, putting a fresh grape in her mouth.

I too ate of the grapes and other berries I found in the forest; but I believed that, with my daily bath in that river, I could have done very well without eating at all.

Every time I slept, I dreamed of finding a wounded angel, who, unable to fly, remained with me until at last she loved me and would not leave me; and every time I woke, it was to see, instead of an angel-visage with lustrous eyes, the white, motionless, wasted face upon the couch. But Adam himself, when first he saw her asleep, could not have looked more anxiously for Eve's awaking than I watched for this woman's. Adam knew nothing of himself, perhaps nothing of his need of another self; I, an alien from my fellows, had learned to love what I had lost! Were this one wasted shred of womanhood to disappear, I should have nothing in me but a consuming hunger after life! I forgot even the Little Ones: things were not amiss with them! here lay what might wake and be a woman! might actually open eyes, and look out of them upon me!

Now first I knew what solitude meant--now that I gazed on one who neither saw nor heard, neither moved nor spoke. I saw now that a man alone is but a being that may become a man--that he is but a need, and therefore a possibility. To be enough for himself, a being must be an eternal, self-existent worm! So superbly constituted, so simply complicate is man; he rises from and stands upon such a pedestal of lower physical organisms and spiritual structures, that no atmosphere will comfort or nourish his life, less divine than that offered by other souls; nowhere but in other lives can he breathe. Only by the reflex of other lives can he ripen his specialty, develop the idea of himself, the individuality that distinguishes him from every other. Were all men alike, each would still have an individuality, secured by his personal consciousness, but there would be small reason why there should be more than two or three such; while, for the development of the differences which make a large and lofty unity possible, and which alone can make millions into a church, an endless and measureless influence and reaction are indispensable. A man to be perfect--complete, that is, in having reached the spiritual condition of persistent and universal growth, which is the mode wherein he inherits the infinitude of his Father-- must have the education of a world of fellow-men. Save for the hope of the dawn of life in the form beside me, I should have fled for fellowship to the beasts that grazed and did not speak. Better to go about with them--infinitely better--than to live alone! But with the faintest prospect of a woman to my friend, I, poorest of creatures, was yet a possible man!

CHAPTER XIX

THE WHITE LEECH

I woke one morning from a profound sleep, with one of my hands very painful. The back of it was much swollen, and in the centre of the swelling was a triangular wound, like the bite of a leech. As the day went on, the swelling subsided, and by the evening the hurt was all but healed. I searched the cave, turning over every stone of any size, but discovered nothing I could imagine capable of injuring me.

Slowly the days passed, and still the body never moved, never opened its eyes. It could not be dead, for assuredly it manifested no sign of decay, and the air about it was quite pure. Moreover, I could imagine that the sharpest angles of the bones had begun to disappear, that the form was everywhere a little rounder, and the skin had less of the parchment-look: if such change was indeed there, life must be there! the tide which had ebbed so far toward the infinite, must have begun again to flow! Oh joy to me, if the rising ripples of life's ocean were indeed burying under lovely shape the bones it had all but forsaken! Twenty times a day I looked for evidence of progress, and twenty times a day I doubted-- sometimes even despaired; but the moment I recalled the mental picture of her as I found her, hope revived.

Several weeks had passed thus, when one night, after lying a long time awake, I rose, thinking to go out and breathe the cooler air; for, although from the running of the stream it was always fresh in the cave, the heat was not seldom a little oppressive. The moon outside was full, the air within shadowy clear, and naturally I cast a lingering look on my treasure ere I went. "Bliss eternal!" I cried aloud, "do I see her eyes?" Great orbs, dark as if cut from the sphere of a starless night, and luminous by excess of darkness, seemed to shine amid the glimmering whiteness of her face. I stole nearer, my heart beating so that I feared the noise of it startling her. I bent over her. Alas, her eyelids were close shut! Hope and Imagination had wrought mutual illusion! my heart's desire would never be! I turned away, threw myself on the floor of the cave, and wept. Then I bethought me that her eyes had been a little open, and that now the awful chink out of which nothingness had peered, was gone: it might be that she had opened them for a moment, and was again asleep!--it might be she was awake and holding them close! In either case, life, less or more, must have shut them! I was comforted, and fell fast asleep.

That night I was again bitten, and awoke with a burning thirst.

In the morning I searched yet more thoroughly, but again in vain. The wound was of the same character, and, as before, was nearly well by the evening. I concluded that some large creature of the leech kind came occasionally from the hot stream. "But, if blood be its object," I said to myself, "so long as I am there, I need hardly fear for my treasure!"

That same morning, when, having peeled a grape as usual and taken away the seeds, I put it in her mouth, her lips made a slight movement of reception, and I KNEW she lived!

My hope was now so much stronger that I began to think of some attire for her: she must be able to rise the moment she wished! I betook myself therefore to the forest, to investigate what material it might afford, and had hardly begun to look when fibrous skeletons, like those of the leaves of the prickly pear, suggested themselves as fit for the purpose. I gathered a stock of them, laid them to dry in the sun, pulled apart the reticulated layers, and of these had soon begun to fashion two loose garments, one to hang from her waist, the other from her shoulders. With the stiletto-point of an aloe-leaf and various filaments, I sewed together three thicknesses of the tissue.

During the week that followed, there was no farther sign except that she more evidently took the grapes. But indeed all the signs became surer: plainly she was growing plumper, and her skin fairer. Still she did not open her eyes; and the horrid fear would at times invade me, that her growth was of some hideous fungoid nature, the few grapes being nowise sufficient to account for it.

Again I was bitten; and now the thing, whatever it was, began to pay me regular visits at intervals of three days. It now generally bit me in the neck or the arm, invariably with but one bite, always while I slept, and never, even when I slept, in the daytime. Hour after hour would I lie awake on the watch, but never heard it coming, or saw sign of its approach. Neither, I believe, did I ever feel it bite me. At length I became so hopeless of catching it, that I no longer troubled myself either to look for it by day, or lie in wait for it at night. I knew from my growing weakness that I was losing blood at a dangerous rate, but I cared little for that: in sight of my eyes death was yielding to life; a soul was gathering strength to save me from loneliness; we would go away together, and I should speedily recover!

The garments were at length finished, and, contemplating my handiwork with no small satisfaction, I proceeded to mat layers of the fibre into sandals.

One night I woke suddenly, breathless and faint, and longing after air, and had risen to crawl from the cave, when a slight rustle in the leaves of the couch set me listening motionless.

"I caught the vile thing," said a feeble voice, in my mother-tongue; "I caught it in the very act!"

She was alive! she spoke! I dared not yield to my transport lest I should terrify her.

"What creature?" I breathed, rather than said.

"The creature," she answered, "that was biting you."

"What was it?"

"A great white leech."

"How big?" I pursued, forcing myself to be calm.

"Not far from six feet long, I should think," she answered.

"You have saved my life, perhaps!--But how could you touch the horrid thing! How brave of you!" I cried.

"I did!" was all her answer, and I thought she shuddered.

"Where is it? What could you do with such a monster?"

"I threw it in the river."

"Then it will come again, I fear!"

"I do not think I could have killed it, even had I known how!--I heard you moaning, and got up to see what disturbed you; saw the frightful thing at your neck, and pulled it away. But I could not hold it, and was hardly able to throw it from me. I only heard it splash in the water!"

"We'll kill it next time!" I said; but with that I turned faint, sought the open air, but fell.

When I came to myself the sun was up. The lady stood a little way off, looking, even in the clumsy attire I had fashioned for her, at once grand and graceful. I HAD seen those glorious eyes! Through the night they had shone! Dark as the darkness primeval, they now outshone the day! She stood erect as a column, regarding me. Her pale cheek indicated no emotion, only question. I rose.

"We must be going!" I said. "The white leech----"

I stopped: a strange smile had flickered over her beautiful face.

"Did you find me there?" she asked, pointing to the cave.

"No; I brought you there," I replied.

"You brought me?"

"Yes."

"From where?"

"From the forest."

"What have you done with my clothes--and my jewels?"

"You had none when I found you."

"Then why did you not leave me?"

"Because I hoped you were not dead."

"Why should you have cared?"

"Because I was very lonely, and wanted you to live."

"You would have kept me enchanted for my beauty!" she said, with proud scorn.

Her words and her look roused my indignation.

"There was no beauty left in you," I said.

"Why, then, again, did you not let me alone?"

"Because you were of my own kind."

"Of YOUR kind?" she cried, in a tone of utter contempt.

"I thought so, but find I was mistaken!"

"Doubtless you pitied me!"

"Never had woman more claim on pity, or less on any other feeling!"

With an expression of pain, mortification, and anger unutterable, she turned from me and stood silent. Starless night lay profound in the gulfs of her eyes: hate of him who brought it back had slain their splendour. The light of life was gone from them.

"Had you failed to rouse me, what would you have done?" she asked suddenly without moving.

"I would have buried it."

"It! What?--You would have buried THIS?" she exclaimed, flashing round upon me in a white fury, her arms thrown out, and her eyes darting forks of cold lightning.

"Nay; that I saw not! That, weary weeks of watching and tending have brought back to you," I answered--for with such a woman I must be plain! "Had I seen the smallest sign of decay, I would at once have buried you."

"Dog of a fool!" she cried, "I was but in a trance--Samoil! what a fate!--Go and fetch the she-savage from whom you borrowed this hideous disguise."

"I made it for you. It is hideous, but I did my best."

She drew herself up to her tall height.

"How long have I been insensible?" she demanded. "A woman could not have made that dress in a day!"

"Not in twenty days," I rejoined, "hardly in thirty!"

"Ha! How long do you pretend I have lain unconscious?--Answer me at once."

"I cannot tell how long you had lain when I found you, but there was nothing left of you save skin and bone: that is more than three months ago.--Your hair was beautiful, nothing else! I have done for it what I could."

"My poor hair!" she said, and brought a great armful of it round from behind her; "--it will be more than a three-months' care to bring YOU to life again!--I suppose I must thank you, although I cannot say I am grateful!"

"There is no need, madam: I would have done the same for any woman--yes, or for any man either!"

"How is it my hair is not tangled?" she said, fondling it.

"It always drifted in the current."

"How?--What do you mean?"

"I could not have brought you to life but by bathing you in the hot river every morning."

She gave a shudder of disgust, and stood for a while with her gaze fixed on the hurrying water. Then she turned to me:

"We must understand each other!" she said. "--You have done me the two worst of wrongs--compelled me to live, and put me to shame: neither of them can I pardon!"

She raised her left hand, and flung it out as if repelling me. Something ice-cold struck me on the forehead. When I came to myself, I was on the ground, wet and shivering.

CHAPTER XX

GONE!--BUT HOW?

I rose, and looked around me, dazed at heart. For a moment I could not see her: she was gone, and loneliness had returned like the cloud after the rain! She whom I brought back from the brink of the grave, had fled from me, and left me with desolation! I dared not one moment remain thus hideously alone. Had I indeed done her a wrong? I must devote my life to sharing the burden I had compelled her to resume!

I descried her walking swiftly over the grass, away from the river, took one plunge for a farewell restorative, and set out to follow her. The last visit of the white leech, and the blow of the woman, had enfeebled me, but already my strength was reviving, and I kept her in sight without difficulty.

"Is this, then, the end?" I said as I went, and my heart brooded a sad song. Her angry, hating eyes haunted me. I could understand her resentment at my having forced life upon her, but how had I further injured her? Why should she loathe me? Could modesty itself be indignant with true service? How should the proudest woman, conscious of my every action, cherish against me the least sense of disgracing wrong? How reverently had I not touched her! As a father his motherless child, I had borne and tended her! Had all my labour, all my despairing hope gone to redeem only ingratitude? "No," I answered myself; "beauty must have a heart! However profoundly hidden, it must be there! The deeper buried, the stronger and truer will it wake at last in its beautiful grave! To rouse that heart were a better gift to her than the happiest life! It would be to give her a nobler, a higher life!"

She was ascending a gentle slope before me, walking straight and steady as one that knew whither, when I became aware that she was increasing the distance between us. I summoned my strength, and it came in full tide. My veins filled with fresh life! My body seemed to become ethereal, and, following like an easy wind, I rapidly overtook her.

Not once had she looked behind. Swiftly she moved, like a Greek goddess to rescue, but without haste. I was within three yards of her, when she turned sharply, yet with grace unbroken, and stood. Fatigue or heat she showed none. Her paleness was not a pallor, but a pure whiteness; her breathing was slow and deep. Her eyes seemed to fill the heavens, and give light to the world. It was nearly noon, but the sense was upon me as of a great night in which an invisible dew makes the stars look large.

"Why do you follow me?" she asked, quietly but rather sternly, as if she had never before seen me.

"I have lived so long," I answered, "on the mere hope of your eyes, that I must want to see them again!"

"You WILL not be spared!" she said coldly. "I command you to stop where you stand."

"Not until I see you in a place of safety will I leave you," I replied.

"Then take the consequences," she said, and resumed her swift-gliding walk.

But as she turned she cast on me a glance, and I stood as if run through with a spear. Her scorn had failed: she would kill me with her beauty!

Despair restored my volition; the spell broke; I ran, and overtook her.

"Have pity upon me!" I cried.

She gave no heed. I followed her like a child whose mother pretends to abandon him. "I will be your slave!" I said, and laid my hand on her arm.

She turned as if a serpent had bit her. I cowered before the blaze of her eyes, but could not avert my own.

"Pity me," I cried again.

She resumed her walking.

The whole day I followed her. The sun climbed the sky, seemed to pause on its summit, went down the other side. Not a moment did she pause, not a moment did I cease to follow. She never turned her head, never relaxed her pace.

The sun went below, and the night came up. I kept close to her: if I lost sight of her for a moment, it would be for ever!

All day long we had been walking over thick soft grass: abruptly she stopped, and threw herself upon it. There was yet light enough to show that she was utterly weary. I stood behind her, and gazed down on her for a moment.

Did I love her? I knew she was not good! Did I hate her? I could not leave her! I knelt beside her.

"Begone! Do not dare touch me," she cried.

Her arms lay on the grass by her sides as if paralyzed.

Suddenly they closed about my neck, rigid as those of the torture-maiden. She drew down my face to hers, and her lips clung to my cheek. A sting of pain shot somewhere through me, and pulsed. I could not stir a hair's breadth. Gradually the pain ceased. A slumberous weariness, a dreamy pleasure stole over me, and then I knew nothing.

All at once I came to myself. The moon was a little way above the horizon, but spread no radiance; she was but a bright thing set in blackness. My cheek smarted; I put my hand to it, and found a wet spot. My neck ached: there again was a wet spot! I sighed heavily, and felt very tired. I turned my eyes listlessly around me--and saw what had become of the light of the moon: it was gathered about the lady! she stood in a shimmering nimbus! I rose and staggered toward her.

"Down!" she cried imperiously, as to a rebellious dog. "Follow me a step if you dare!"

"I will!" I murmured, with an agonised effort.

"Set foot within the gates of my city, and my people will stone you: they do not love beggars!"

I was deaf to her words. Weak as water, and half awake, I did not know that I moved, but the distance grew less between us. She took one step back, raised her left arm, and with the clenched hand seemed to strike me on the forehead. I received as it were a blow from an iron hammer, and fell.

I sprang to my feet, cold and wet, but clear-headed and strong. Had the blow revived me? it had left neither wound nor pain!--But how came I wet?--I could not have lain long, for the moon was no higher!

The lady stood some yards away, her back toward me. She was doing something, I could not distinguish what. Then by her sudden gleam I knew she had thrown off her garments, and stood white in the dazed moon. One moment she stood--and fell forward.

A streak of white shot away in a swift-drawn line. The same instant the moon recovered herself, shining out with a full flash, and I saw that the streak was a long-bodied thing, rushing in great, low-curved bounds over the grass. Dark spots seemed to run like a stream adown its back, as if it had been fleeting along under the edge of a wood, and catching the shadows of the leaves.

"God of mercy!" I cried, "is the terrible creature speeding to the night-infolded city?" and I seemed to hear from afar the sudden burst and spread of outcrying terror, as the pale savage bounded from house to house, rending and slaying.

While I gazed after it fear-stricken, past me from behind, like a swift, all but noiseless arrow, shot a second large creature, pure white. Its path was straight for the spot where the lady had fallen, and, as I thought, lay. My tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. I sprang forward pursuing the beast. But in a moment the spot I made for was far behind it.

"It was well," I thought, "that I could not cry out: if she had risen, the monster would have been upon her!"

But when I reached the place, no lady was there; only the garments she had dropped lay dusk in the moonlight.

I stood staring after the second beast. It tore over the ground with yet greater swiftness than the former--in long, level, skimming leaps, the very embodiment of wasteless speed. It followed the line the other had taken, and I watched it grow smaller and smaller, until it disappeared in the uncertain distance.

But where was the lady? Had the first beast surprised her, creeping upon her noiselessly? I had heard no shriek! and there had not been time to devour her! Could it have caught her up as it ran, and borne her away to its den? So laden it could not have run so fast! and I should have seen that it carried something!

Horrible doubts began to wake in me. After a thorough but fruitless search, I set out in the track of the two animals.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FUGITIVE MOTHER

As I hastened along, a cloud came over the moon, and from the gray dark suddenly emerged a white figure, clasping a child to her bosom, and stooping as she ran. She was on a line parallel with my own, but did not perceive me as she hurried along, terror and anxiety in every movement of her driven speed.

"She is chased!" I said to myself. "Some prowler of this terrible night is after her!"

To follow would have added to her fright: I stepped into her track to stop her pursuer.

As I stood for a moment looking after her through the dusk, behind me came a swift, soft-footed rush, and ere I could turn, something sprang over my head, struck me sharply on the forehead, and knocked me down. I was up in an instant, but all I saw of my assailant was a vanishing whiteness. I ran after the beast, with the blood trickling from my forehead; but had run only a few steps, when a shriek of despair tore the quivering night. I ran the faster, though I could not but fear it must already be too late.

In a minute or two I spied a low white shape approaching me through the vapour-dusted moonlight. It must be another beast, I thought at first, for it came slowly, almost crawling, with strange, floundering leaps, as of a creature in agony! I drew aside from its path, and waited. As it neared me, I saw it was going on three legs, carrying its left fore-paw high from the ground. It had many dark, oval spots on a shining white skin, and was attended by a low rushing sound, as of water falling upon grass. As it went by me, I saw something streaming from the lifted paw.

"It is blood!" I said to myself, "some readier champion than I has wounded the beast!" But, strange to tell, such a pity seized me at sight of the suffering creature, that, though an axe had been in my hand I could not have struck at it. In a broken succession of hobbling leaps it went out of sight, its blood, as it seemed, still issuing in a small torrent, which kept flowing back softly through the grass beside me. "If it go on bleeding like that," I thought, "it will soon be hurtless!"

I went on, for I might yet be useful to the woman, and hoped also to see her deliverer.

I descried her a little way off, seated on the grass, with her child in her lap.

"Can I do anything for you?" I asked.

At the sound of my voice she started violently, and would have risen. I threw myself on the ground.

"You need not be frightened," I said. "I was following the beast when happily you found a nearer protector! It passed me now with its foot bleeding so much that by this time it must be all but dead!"

"There is little hope of that!" she answered, trembling. "Do you not know whose beast she is?"

Now I had certain strange suspicions, but I answered that I knew nothing of the brute, and asked what had become of her champion.

"What champion?" she rejoined. "I have seen no one."

"Then how came the monster to grief?"

"I pounded her foot with a stone--as hard as I could strike. Did you not hear her cry?"

"Well, you are a brave woman!" I answered. "I thought it was you gave the cry!"

"It was the leopardess."

"I never heard such a sound from the throat of an animal! it was like the scream of a woman in torture!"

"My voice was gone; I could not have shrieked to save my baby! When I saw the horrid mouth at my darling's little white neck, I caught up a stone and mashed her lame foot."

"Tell me about the creature," I said; "I am a stranger in these parts."

"You will soon know about her if you are going to Bulika!" she answered. "Now, I must never go back there!"

"Yes, I am going to Bulika," I said, "--to see the princess."

"Have a care; you had better not go!--But perhaps you are--! The princess is a very good, kind woman!"

I heard a little movement. Clouds had by this time gathered so thick over the moon that I could scarcely see my companion: I feared she was rising to run from me.

"You are in no danger of any sort from me," I said. "What oath would you like me to take?"

"I know by your speech that you are not of the people of Bulika," she replied; "I will trust you!--I am not of them, either, else I should not be able: they never trust any one--If only I could see you! But I like your voice!--There, my darling is asleep! The foul beast has not hurt her!--Yes: it was my baby she was after!" she went on, caressing the child. "And then she would have torn her mother to pieces for carrying her off!--Some say the princess has two white leopardesses," she continued: "I know only one--with spots. Everybody knows HER! If the princess hear of a baby, she sends her immediately to suck its blood, and then it either dies or grows up an idiot. I would have gone away with my baby, but the princess was from home, and I thought I might wait until I was a little stronger. But she must have taken the beast with her, and been on her way home when I left, and come across my track. I heard the SNIFF-SNUFF of the leopardess behind me, and ran;--oh, how I ran!--But my darling will not die! There is no mark on her!"

"Where are you taking her?"

"Where no one ever tells!"

"Why is the princess so cruel?"

"There is an old prophecy that a child will be the death of her. That is why she will listen to no offer of marriage, they say."

"But what will become of her country if she kill all the babies?"

"She does not care about her country. She sends witches around to teach the women spells that keep babies away, and give them horrible things to eat. Some say she is in league with the Shadows to put an end to the race. At night we hear the questing beast, and lie awake and shiver. She can tell at once the house where a baby is coming, and lies down at the door, watching to get in. There are words that have power to shoo her away, only they do not always work--But here I sit talking, and the beast may by this time have got home, and her mistress be sending the other after us!"

As thus she ended, she rose in haste.

"I do not think she will ever get home.--Let me carry the baby for you!" I said, as I rose also.

She returned me no answer, and when I would have taken it, only clasped it the closer.

"I cannot think," I said, walking by her side, "how the brute could be bleeding so much!"

"Take my advice, and don't go near the palace," she answered. "There are sounds in it at night as if the dead were trying to shriek, but could not open their mouths!"

She bade me an abrupt farewell. Plainly she did not want more of my company; so I stood still, and heard her footsteps die away on the grass.

CHAPTER XXII

BULIKA

I had lost all notion of my position, and was walking about in pure, helpless impatience, when suddenly I found myself in the path of the leopardess, wading in the blood from her paw. It ran against my ankles with the force of a small brook, and I got out of it the more quickly because of an unshaped suspicion in my mind as to whose blood it might be. But I kept close to the sound of it, walking up the side of the stream, for it would guide me in the direction of Bulika.

I soon began to reflect, however, that no leopardess, no elephant, no hugest animal that in our world preceded man, could keep such a torrent flowing, except every artery in its body were open, and its huge system went on filling its vessels from fields and lakes and forests as fast as they emptied themselves: it could not be blood! I dipped a finger in it, and at once satisfied myself that it was not. In truth, however it might have come there, it was a softly murmuring rivulet of water that ran, without channel, over the grass! But sweet as was its song, I dared not drink of it; I kept walking on, hoping after the light, and listening to the familiar sound so long unheard--for that of the hot stream was very different. The mere wetting of my feet in it, however, had so refreshed me, that I went on without fatigue till the darkness began to grow thinner, and I knew the sun was drawing nigh. A few minutes more, and I could discern, against the pale aurora, the wall-towers of a city--seemingly old as time itself. Then I looked down to get a sight of the brook.

It was gone. I had indeed for a long time noted its sound growing fainter, but at last had ceased to attend to it. I looked back: the grass in its course lay bent as it had flowed, and here and there glimmered a small pool. Toward the city, there was no trace of it. Near where I stood, the flow of its fountain must at least have paused!

Around the city were gardens, growing many sorts of vegetables, hardly one of which I recognised. I saw no water, no flowers, no sign of animals. The gardens came very near the walls, but were separated from them by huge heaps of gravel and refuse thrown from the battlements.

I went up to the nearest gate, and found it but half-closed, nowise secured, and without guard or sentinel. To judge by its hinges, it could not be farther opened or shut closer. Passing through, I looked down a long ancient street. It was utterly silent, and with scarce an indication in it of life present. Had I come upon a dead city? I turned and went out again, toiled a long way over the dust-heaps, and crossed several roads, each leading up to a gate: I would not re-enter until some of the inhabitants should be stirring.

What was I there for? what did I expect or hope to find? what did I mean to do?

I must see, if but once more, the woman I had brought to life! I did not desire her society: she had waked in me frightful suspicions; and friendship, not to say love, was wildly impossible between us! But her presence had had a strange influence upon me, and in her presence I must resist, and at the same time analyse that influence! The seemingly inscrutable in her I would fain penetrate: to understand something of her mode of being would be to look into marvels such as imagination could never have suggested! In this I was too daring: a man must not, for knowledge, of his own will encounter temptation! On the other hand, I had reinstated an evil force about to perish, and was, to the extent of my opposing faculty, accountable for what mischief might ensue! I had learned that she was the enemy of children: the Little Ones might be in her danger! It was in the hope of finding out something of their history that I had left them; on that I had received a little light: I must have more; I must learn how to protect them!

Hearing at length a little stir in the place, I walked through the next gate, and thence along a narrow street of tall houses to a little square, where I sat down on the base of a pillar with a hideous bat-like creature atop. Ere long, several of the inhabitants came sauntering past. I spoke to one: he gave me a rude stare and ruder word, and went on.

I got up and went through one narrow street after another, gradually filling with idlers, and was not surprised to see no children. By and by, near one of the gates, I encountered a group of young men who reminded me not a little of the bad giants. They came about me staring, and presently began to push and hustle me, then to throw things at me. I bore it as well as I could, wishing not to provoke enmity where wanted to remain for a while. Oftener than once or twice I appealed to passers-by whom I fancied more benevolent-looking, but none would halt a moment to listen to me. I looked poor, and that was enough: to the citizens of Bulika, as to house-dogs, poverty was an offence! Deformity and sickness were taxed; and no legislation of their princess was more heartily approved of than what tended to make poverty subserve wealth.

I took to my heels at last, and no one followed me beyond the gate. A lumbering fellow, however, who sat by it eating a hunch of bread, picked up a stone to throw after me, and happily, in his stupid eagerness, threw, not the stone but the bread. I took it, and he did not dare follow to reclaim it: beyond the walls they were cowards every one. I went off a few hundred yards, threw myself down, ate the bread, fell asleep, and slept soundly in the grass, where the hot sunlight renewed my strength.

It was night when I woke. The moon looked down on me in friendly fashion, seeming to claim with me old acquaintance. She was very bright, and the same moon, I thought, that saw me through the terrors of my first night in that strange world. A cold wind blew from the gate, bringing with it an evil odour; but it did not chill me, for the sun had plenished me with warmth. I crept again into the city. There I found the few that were still in the open air crouched in corners to escape the shivering blast.

I was walking slowly through the long narrow street, when, just before me, a huge white thing bounded across it, with a single flash in the moonlight, and disappeared. I turned down the next opening, eager to get sight of it again.

It was a narrow lane, almost too narrow to pass through, but it led me into a wider street. The moment I entered the latter, I saw on the opposite side, in the shadow, the creature I had followed, itself following like a dog what I took for a man. Over his shoulder, every other moment, he glanced at the animal behind him, but neither spoke to it, nor attempted to drive it away. At a place where he had to cross a patch of moonlight, I saw that he cast no shadow, and was himself but a flat superficial shadow, of two dimensions. He was, nevertheless, an opaque shadow, for he not merely darkened any object on the other side of him, but rendered it, in fact, invisible. In the shadow he was blacker than the shadow; in the moonlight he looked like one who had drawn his shadow up about him, for not a suspicion of it moved beside or under him; while the gleaming animal, which followed so close at his heels as to seem the white shadow of his blackness, and which I now saw to be a leopardess, drew her own gliding shadow black over the ground by her side. When they passed together from the shadow into the moonlight, the Shadow deepened in blackness, the animal flashed into radiance. I was at the moment walking abreast of them on the opposite side, my bare feet sounding on the flat stones: the leopardess never turned head or twitched ear; the shadow seemed once to look at me, for I lost his profile, and saw for a second only a sharp upright line. That instant the wind found me and blew through me: I shuddered from head to foot, and my heart went from wall to wall of my bosom, like a pebble in a child's rattle.

CHAPTER XXIII

A WOMAN OF BULIKA

I turned aside into an alley, and sought shelter in a small archway. In the mouth of it I stopped, and looked out at the moonlight which filled the alley. The same instant a woman came gliding in after me, turned, trembling, and looked out also. A few seconds passed; then a huge leopard, its white skin dappled with many blots, darted across the archway. The woman pressed close to me, and my heart filled with pity. I put my arm round her.

"If the brute come here, I will lay hold of it," I said, "and you must run."

"Thank you!" she murmured.

"Have you ever seen it before?" I asked.

"Several times," she answered, still trembling. "She is a pet of the princess's. You are a stranger, or you would know her!"

"I am a stranger," I answered. "But is she, then, allowed to run loose?"

"She is kept in a cage, her mouth muzzled, and her feet in gloves of crocodile leather. Chained she is too; but she gets out often, and sucks the blood of any child she can lay hold of. Happily there are not many mothers in Bulika!"

Here she burst into tears.

"I wish I were at home!" she sobbed. "The princess returned only last night, and there is the leopardess out already! How am I to get into the house? It is me she is after, I know! She will be lying at my own door, watching for me!--But I am a fool to talk to a stranger!"

"All strangers are not bad!" I said. "The beast shall not touch you till she has done with me, and by that time you will be in. You are happy to have a house to go to! What a terrible wind it is!"

"Take me home safe, and I will give you shelter from it," she rejoined. "But we must wait a little!"

I asked her many questions. She told me the people never did anything except dig for precious stones in their cellars. They were rich, and had everything made for them in other towns.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it is a disgrace to work," she answered. "Everybody in Bulika knows that!"

I asked how they were rich if none of them earned money. She replied that their ancestors had saved for them, and they never spent. When they wanted money they sold a few of their gems.

"But there must be some poor!" I said.

"I suppose there must be, but we never think of such people. When one goes poor, we forget him. That is how we keep rich. We mean to be rich always."

"But when you have dug up all your precious stones and sold them, you will have to spend your money, and one day you will have none left!"

"We have so many, and there are so many still in the ground, that that day will never come," she replied.

"Suppose a strange people were to fall upon you, and take everything you have!"

"No strange people will dare; they are all horribly afraid of our princess. She it is who keeps us safe and free and rich!"

Every now and then as she spoke, she would stop and look behind her.

I asked why her people had such a hatred of strangers. She answered that the presence of a stranger defiled the city.

"How is that?" I said.

"Because we are more ancient and noble than any other nation.--Therefore," she added, "we always turn strangers out before night."

"How, then, can you take me into your house?" I asked.

"I will make an exception of you," she replied.

"Is there no place in the city for the taking in of strangers?"

"Such a place would be pulled down, and its owner burned. How is purity to be preserved except by keeping low people at a proper distance? Dignity is such a delicate thing!"

She told me that their princess had reigned for thousands of years; that she had power over the air and the water as well as the earth--and, she believed, over the fire too; that she could do what she pleased, and was answerable to nobody.

When at length she was willing to risk the attempt, we took our way through lanes and narrow passages, and reached her door without having met a single live creature. It was in a wider street, between two tall houses, at the top of a narrow, steep stair, up which she climbed slowly, and I followed. Ere we reached the top, however, she seemed to take fright, and darted up the rest of the steps: I arrived just in time to have the door closed in my face, and stood confounded on the landing, where was about length enough, between the opposite doors of the two houses, for a man to lie down.

Weary, and not scrupling to defile Bulika with my presence, I took advantage of the shelter, poor as it was.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WHITE LEOPARDESS

At the foot of the stair lay the moonlit street, and I could hear the unwholesome, inhospitable wind blowing about below. But not a breath of it entered my retreat, and I was composing myself to rest, when suddenly my eyes opened, and there was the head of the shining creature I had seen following the Shadow, just rising above the uppermost step! The moment she caught sight of my eyes, she stopped and began to retire, tail foremost. I sprang up; whereupon, having no room to turn, she threw herself backward, head over tail, scrambled to her feet, and in a moment was down the stair and gone. I followed her to the bottom, and looked all up and down the street. Not seeing her, I went back to my hard couch.

There were, then, two evil creatures prowling about the city, one with, and one without spots! I was not inclined to risk much for man or woman in Bulika, but the life of a child might well be worth such a poor one as mine, and I resolved to keep watch at that door the rest of the night.

Presently I heard the latch move, slow, slow: I looked up, and seeing the door half-open, rose and slid softly in. Behind it stood, not the woman I had befriended, but the muffled woman of the desert. Without a word she led me a few steps to an empty stone-paved chamber, and pointed to a rug on the floor. I wrapped myself in it, and once more lay down. She shut the door of the room, and I heard the outer door open and close again. There was no light save what came from the moonlit air.

As I lay sleepless, I began to hear a stifled moaning. It went on for a good while, and then came the cry of a child, followed by a terrible shriek. I sprang up and darted into the passage: from another door in it came the white leopardess with a new-born baby in her mouth, carrying it like a cub of her own. I threw myself upon her, and compelled her to drop the infant, which fell on the stone slabs with a piteous wail.

At the cry appeared the muffled woman. She stepped over us, the beast and myself, where we lay struggling in the narrow passage, took up the child, and carried it away. Returning, she lifted me off the animal, opened the door, and pushed me gently out. At my heels followed the leopardess.

"She too has failed me!" thought I; "--given me up to the beast to be settled with at her leisure! But we shall have a tussle for it!"

I ran down the stair, fearing she would spring on my back, but she followed me quietly. At the foot I turned to lay hold of her, but she sprang over my head; and when again I turned to face her, she was crouching at my feet! I stooped and stroked her lovely white skin; she responded by licking my bare feet with her hard dry tongue. Then I patted and fondled her, a well of tenderness overflowing in my heart: she might be treacherous too, but if I turned from every show of love lest it should be feigned, how was I ever to find the real love which must be somewhere in every world?

I stood up; she rose, and stood beside me.

A bulky object fell with a heavy squelch in the middle of the street, a few yards from us. I ran to it, and found a pulpy mass, with just form enough left to show it the body of a woman. It must have been thrown from some neighbouring window! I looked around me: the Shadow was walking along the other side of the way, with the white leopardess again at his heel!

I followed and gained upon them, urging in my heart for the leopardess that probably she was not a free agent. When I got near them, however, she turned and flew at me with such a hideous snarl, that instinctively I drew back: instantly she resumed her place behind the Shadow. Again I drew near; again she flew at me, her eyes flaming like live emeralds. Once more I made the experiment: she snapped at me like a dog, and bit me. My heart gave way, and I uttered a cry; whereupon the creature looked round with a glance that plainly meant--"Why WOULD you make me do it?"

I turned away angry with myself: I had been losing my time ever since I entered the place! night as it was I would go straight to the palace! From the square I had seen it--high above the heart of the city, compassed with many defences, more a fortress than a palace!

But I found its fortifications, like those of the city, much neglected, and partly ruinous. For centuries, clearly, they had been of no account! It had great and strong gates, with something like a drawbridge to them over a rocky chasm; but they stood open, and it was hard to believe that water had ever occupied the hollow before them. All was so still that sleep seemed to interpenetrate the structure, causing the very moonlight to look discordantly awake. I must either enter like a thief, or break a silence that rendered frightful the mere thought of a sound!

Like an outcast dog I was walking about the walls, when I came to a little recess with a stone bench: I took refuge in it from the wind, lay down, and in spite of the cold fell fast asleep.

I was wakened by something leaping upon me, and licking my face with the rough tongue of a feline animal. "It is the white leopardess!" I thought. "She is come to suck my blood!--and why should she not have it?--it would cost me more to defend than to yield it!" So I lay still, expecting a shoot of pain. But the pang did not arrive; a pleasant warmth instead began to diffuse itself through me. Stretched at my back, she lay as close to me as she could lie, the heat of her body slowly penetrating mine, and her breath, which had nothing of the wild beast in it, swathing my head and face in a genial atmosphere. A full conviction that her intention toward me was good, gained possession of me. I turned like a sleepy boy, threw my arm over her, and sank into profound unconsciousness.

When I began to come to myself, I fancied I lay warm and soft in my own bed. "Is it possible I am at home?" I thought. The well-known scents of the garden seemed to come crowding in. I rubbed my eyes, and looked out: I lay on a bare stone, in the heart of a hateful city!

I sprang from the bench. Had I indeed had a leopardess for my bedfellow, or had I but dreamed it? She had but just left me, for the warmth of her body was with me yet!

I left the recess with a new hope, as strong as it was shapeless. One thing only was clear to me: I must find the princess! Surely I had some power with her, if not over her! Had I not saved her life, and had she not prolonged it at the expense of my vitality? The reflection gave me courage to encounter her, be she what she might.

CHAPTER XXV

THE PRINCESS

Making a circuit of the castle, I came again to the open gates, crossed the ravine-like moat, and found myself in a paved court, planted at regular intervals with towering trees like poplars. In the centre was one taller than the rest, whose branches, near the top, spread a little and gave it some resemblance to a palm. Between their great stems I got glimpses of the palace, which was of a style strange to me, but suggested Indian origin. It was long and low, with lofty towers at the corners, and one huge dome in the middle, rising from the roof to half the height of the towers. The main entrance was in the centre of the front--a low arch that seemed half an ellipse. No one was visible, the doors stood wide open, and I went unchallenged into a large hall, in the form of a longish ellipse. Toward one side stood a cage, in which couched, its head on its paws, a huge leopardess, chained by a steel collar, with its mouth muzzled and its paws muffled. It was white with dark oval spots, and lay staring out of wide-open eyes, with canoe-shaped pupils, and great green irids. It appeared to watch me, but not an eyeball, not a foot, not a whisker moved, and its tail stretched out behind it rigid as an iron bar. I could not tell whether it was a live thing or not.

From this vestibule two low passages led; I took one of them, and found it branch into many, all narrow and irregular. At a spot where was scarce room for two to pass, a page ran against me. He started back in terror, but having scanned me, gathered impudence, puffed himself out, and asked my business.

"To see the princess," I answered.

"A likely thing!" he returned. "I have not seen her highness this morning myself!"

I caught him by the back of the neck, shook him, and said, "Take me to her at once, or I will drag you with me till I find her. She shall know how her servants receive her visitors."

He gave a look at me, and began to pull like a blind man's dog, leading me thus to a large kitchen, where were many servants, feebly busy, and hardly awake. I expected them to fall upon me and drive me out, but they stared instead, with wide eyes--not at me, but at something behind me, and grew more ghastly as they stared. I turned my head, and saw the white leopardess, regarding them in a way that might have feared stouter hearts.

Presently, however, one of them, seeing, I suppose, that attack was not imminent, began to recover himself; I turned to him, and let the boy go.

"Take me to the princess," I said.

"She has not yet left her room, your lordship," he replied.

"Let her know that I am here, waiting audience of her."

"Will your lordship please to give me your name?"

"Tell her that one who knows the white leech desires to see her."

"She will kill me if I take such a message: I must not. I dare not."

"You refuse?"

He cast a glance at my attendant, and went.

The others continued staring--too much afraid of her to take their eyes off her. I turned to the graceful creature, where she stood, her muzzle dropped to my heel, white as milk, a warm splendour in the gloomy place, and stooped and patted her. She looked up at me; the mere movement of her head was enough to scatter them in all directions. She rose on her hind legs, and put her paws on my shoulders; I threw my arms round her. She pricked her ears, broke from me, and was out of sight in a moment.

The man I had sent to the princess entered.

"Please to come this way, my lord," he said.

My heart gave a throb, as if bracing itself to the encounter. I followed him through many passages, and was at last shown into a room so large and so dark that its walls were invisible. A single spot on the floor reflected a little light, but around that spot all was black. I looked up, and saw at a great height an oval aperture in the roof, on the periphery of which appeared the joints between blocks of black marble. The light on the floor showed close fitting slabs of the same material. I found afterward that the elliptical wall as well was of black marble, absorbing the little light that reached it. The roof was the long half of an ellipsoid, and the opening in it was over one of the foci of the ellipse of the floor.

you will find a garment. When you come down, I shall be in the room to your left at the foot of the stair."

I stood as she left me, accusing my presumption: how was I to treat this lovely woman as a thing of evil, who behaved to me like a sister?--Whence the marvellous change in her? She left me with a blow; she received me almost with an embrace! She had reviled me; she said she knew I would follow and find her! Did she know my doubts concerning her--how much I should want explained? COULD she explain all? Could I believe her if she did? As to her hospitality, I had surely earned and might accept that--at least until I came to a definite judgment concerning her!

Could such beauty as I saw, and such wickedness as I suspected, exist in the same person? If they could, HOW was it possible? Unable to answer the former question, I must let the latter wait!

Clear as crystal, the water in the great white bath sent a sparkling flash from the corner where it lay sunk in the marble floor, and seemed to invite me to its embrace. Except the hot stream, two draughts in the cottage of the veiled woman, and the pools in the track of the wounded leopardess, I had not seen water since leaving home: it looked a thing celestial. I plunged in.

Immediately my brain was filled with an odour strange and delicate, which yet I did not altogether like. It made me doubt the princess afresh: had she medicated it? had she enchanted it? was she in any way working on me unlawfully? And how was there water in the palace, and not a drop in the city? I remembered the crushed paw of the leopardess, and sprang from the bath.

What had I been bathing in? Again I saw the fleeing mother, again I heard the howl, again I saw the limping beast. But what matter whence it flowed? was not the water sweet? Was it not very water the pitcher-plant secreted from its heart, and stored for the weary traveller? Water came from heaven: what mattered the well where it gathered, or the spring whence it burst? But I did not re-enter the bath.

I put on the robe of white wool, embroidered on the neck and hem, that lay ready for me, and went down the stair to the room whither my hostess had directed me. It was round, all of alabaster, and without a single window: the light came through everywhere, a soft, pearly shimmer rather than shine. Vague shadowy forms went flitting about over the walls and low dome, like loose rain-clouds over a grey-blue sky.

The princess stood waiting me, in a robe embroidered with argentine rings and discs, rectangles and lozenges, close together--a silver mail. It fell unbroken from her neck and hid her feet, but its long open sleeves left her arms bare.

In the room was a table of ivory, bearing cakes and fruit, an ivory jug of milk, a crystal jug of wine of a pale rose-colour, and a white loaf.

"Here we do not kill to eat," she said; "but I think you will like what I can give you."

I told her I could desire nothing better than what I saw. She seated herself on a couch by the table, and made me a sign to sit by her.

She poured me out a bowlful of milk, and, handing me the loaf, begged me to break from it such a piece as I liked. Then she filled from the wine-jug two silver goblets of grotesquely graceful workmanship.

"You have never drunk wine like this!" she said.

I drank, and wondered: every flower of Hybla and Hymettus must have sent its ghost to swell the soul of that wine!

"And now that you will be able to listen," she went on, "I must do what I can to make myself intelligible to you. Our natures, however, are so different, that this may not be easy. Men and women live but to die; we, that is such as I--we are but a few--live to live on. Old age is to you a horror; to me it is a dear desire: the older we grow, the nearer we are to our perfection. Your perfection is a poor thing, comes soon, and lasts but a little while; ours is a ceaseless ripening. I am not yet ripe, and have lived thousands of your years--how many, I never cared to note. The everlasting will not be measured.

"Many lovers have sought me; I have loved none of them: they sought but to enslave me; they sought me but as the men of my city seek gems of price.--When you found me, I found a man! I put you to the test; you stood it; your love was genuine!--It was, however, far from ideal--far from such love as I would have. You loved me truly, but not with true love. Pity has, but is not love. What woman of any world would return love for pity? Such love as yours was then, is hateful to me. I knew that, if you saw me as I am, you would love me--like the rest of them--to have and to hold: I would none of that either! I would be otherwise loved! I would have a love that outlived hopelessness, outmeasured indifference, hate, scorn! Therefore did I put on cruelty, despite, ingratitude. When I left you, I had shown myself such as you could at least no longer follow from pity: I was no longer in need of you! But you must satisfy my desire or set me free--prove yourself priceless or worthless! To satisfy the hunger of my love, you must follow me, looking for nothing, not gratitude, not even pity in return!--follow and find me, and be content with merest presence, with scantest forbearance!-- I, not you, have failed; I yield the contest."

She looked at me tenderly, and hid her face in her hands. But I had caught a flash and a sparkle behind the tenderness, and did not believe her. She laid herself out to secure and enslave me; she only fascinated me!

"Beautiful princess," I said, "let me understand how you came to be found in such evil plight."

"There are things I cannot explain," she replied, "until you have become capable of understanding them--which can only be when love is grown perfect. There are many things so hidden from you that you cannot even wish to know them; but any question you can put, I can in some measure answer.

"I had set out to visit a part of my dominions occupied by a savage dwarf-people, strong and fierce, enemies to law and order, opposed to every kind of progress--an evil race. I went alone, fearing nothing, unaware of the least necessity for precaution. I did not know that upon the hot stream beside which you found me, a certain woman, by no means so powerful as myself, not being immortal, had cast what you call a spell--which is merely the setting in motion of a force as natural as any other, but operating primarily in a region beyond the ken of the mortal who makes use of the force.

"I set out on my journey, reached the stream, bounded across it,----"

A shadow of embarrassment darkened her cheek: I understood it, but showed no sign. Checked for the merest moment, she went on:

"--you know what a step it is in parts!--But in the very act, an indescribable cold invaded me. I recognised at once the nature of the assault, and knew it could affect me but temporarily. By sheer force of will I dragged myself to the wood--nor knew anything more until I saw you asleep, and the horrible worm at your neck. I crept out, dragged the monster from you, and laid my lips to the wound. You began to wake; I buried myself among the leaves."

She rose, her eyes flashing as never human eyes flashed, and threw her arms high over her head.

"What you have made me is yours!" she cried. "I will repay you as never yet did woman! My power, my beauty, my love are your own: take them."

She dropt kneeling beside me, laid her arms across my knees, and looked up in my face.

Then first I noted on her left hand a large clumsy glove. In my mind's eye I saw hair and claws under it, but I knew it was a hand shut hard--perhaps badly bruised. I glanced at the other: it was lovely as hand could be, and I felt that, if I did less than loathe her, I should love her. Not to dally with usurping emotions, I turned my eyes aside.

She started to her feet. I sat motionless, looking down.

"To me she may be true!" said my vanity. For a moment I was tempted to love a lie.

An odour, rather than the gentlest of airy pulses, was fanning me. I glanced up. She stood erect before me, waving her lovely arms in seemingly mystic fashion.

A frightful roar made my heart rebound against the walls of its cage. The alabaster trembled as if it would shake into shivers. The princess shuddered visibly.

"My wine was too strong for you!" she said, in a quavering voice; "I ought not to have let you take a full draught! Go and sleep now, and when you wake ask me what you please.--I will go with you: come."

As she preceded me up the stair,--

"I do not wonder that roar startled you!" she said. "It startled me, I confess: for a moment I feared she had escaped. But that is impossible."

The roar seemed to me, however--I could not tell why--to come from the WHITE leopardess, and to be meant for me, not the princess.

With a smile she left me at the door of my room, but as she turned I read anxiety on her beautiful face.

Dimly moonlighted, the cage of the leopardess was the arena of what seemed a desperate although silent struggle. Two vastly differing forms, human and bestial, with entangled confusion of mingling bodies and limbs, writhed and wrestled in closest embrace. It had lasted but an instant when I saw the leopardess out of the cage, walking quietly to the open door. As I hastened after her I threw a glance behind me: there was the leopardess in the cage, couching motionless as when I saw her first.

The moon, half-way up the sky, was shining round and clear; the bodiless shadow I had seen the night before, was walking through the trees toward the gate; and after him went the leopardess, swinging her tail. I followed, a little way off, as silently as they, and neither of them once looked round. Through the open gate we went down to the city, lying quiet as the moonshine upon it. The face of the moon was very still, and its stillness looked like that of expectation.

The Shadow took his way straight to the stair at the top of which I had lain the night before. Without a pause he went up, and the leopardess followed. I quickened my pace, but, a moment after, heard a cry of horror. Then came the fall of something soft and heavy between me and the stair, and at my feet lay a body, frightfully blackened and crushed, but still recognisable as that of the woman who had led me home and shut me out. As I stood petrified, the spotted leopardess came bounding down the stair with a baby in her mouth. I darted to seize her ere she could turn at the foot; but that instant, from behind me, the white leopardess, like a great bar of glowing silver, shot through the moonlight, and had her by the neck. She dropped the child; I caught it up, and stood to watch the battle between them.

What a sight it was--now the one, now the other uppermost, both too intent for any noise beyond a low growl, a whimpered cry, or a snarl of hate--followed by a quicker scrambling of claws, as each, worrying and pushing and dragging, struggled for foothold on the pavement! The spotted leopardess was larger than the white, and I was anxious for my friend; but I soon saw that, though neither stronger nor more active, the white leopardess had the greater endurance. Not once did she lose her hold on the neck of the other. From the spotted throat at length issued a howl of agony, changing, by swift-crowded gradations, into the long-drawn CRESCENDO of a woman's uttermost wail. The white one relaxed her jaws; the spotted one drew herself away, and rose on her hind legs. Erect in the moonlight stood the princess, a confused rush of shadows careering over her whiteness--the spots of the leopard crowding, hurrying, fleeing to the refuge of her eyes, where merging they vanished. The last few, outsped and belated, mingled with the cloud of her streamy hair, leaving her radiant as the moon when a legion of little vapours has flown, wind-hunted, off her silvery disc--save that, adown the white column of her throat, a thread of blood still trickled from every wound of her adversary's terrible teeth. She turned away, took a few steps with the gait of a Hecate, fell, covered afresh with her spots, and fled at a long, stretching gallop.

The white leopardess turned also, sprang upon me, pulled my arms asunder, caught the baby as it fell, and flew with it along the street toward the gate

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SILENT FOUNTAIN

I turned and followed the spotted leopardess, catching but one glimpse of her as she tore up the brow of the hill to the gate of the palace. When I reached the entrance-hall, the princess was just throwing the robe around her which she had left on the floor. The blood had ceased to flow from her wounds, and had dried in the wind of her flight.

When she saw me, a flash of anger crossed her face, and she turned her head aside. Then, with an attempted smile, she looked at me, and said,

"I have met with a small accident! Happening to hear that the cat-woman was again in the city, I went down to send her away. But she had one of her horrid creatures with her: it sprang upon me, and had its claws in my neck before I could strike it!"

She gave a shiver, and I could not help pitying her, although I knew she lied, for her wounds were real, and her face reminded me of how she looked in the cave. My heart began to reproach me that I had let her fight unaided, and I suppose I looked the compassion I felt.

"Child of folly!" she said, with another attempted smile, "--not crying, surely!--Wait for me here; I am going into the black hall for a moment. I want you to get me something for my scratches."

But I followed her close. Out of my sight I feared her.

The instant the princess entered, I heard a buzzing sound as of many low voices, and, one portion after another, the assembly began to be shiftingly illuminated, as by a ray that went travelling from spot to spot. Group after group would shine out for a space, then sink back into the general vagueness, while another part of the vast company would grow momently bright.

Some of the actions going on when thus illuminated, were not unknown to me; I had been in them, or had looked on them, and so had the princess: present with every one of them I now saw her. The skullheaded dancers footed the grass in the forest-hall: there was the princess looking in at the door! The fight went on in the Evil Wood: there was the princess urging it! Yet I was close behind her all the time, she standing motionless, her head sunk on her bosom. The confused murmur continued, the confused commotion of colours and shapes; and still the ray went shifting and showing. It settled at last on the hollow in the heath, and there was the princess, walking up and down, and trying in vain to wrap the vapour around her! Then first I was startled at what I saw: the old librarian walked up to her, and stood for a moment regarding her; she fell; her limbs forsook her and fled; her body vanished.

A wild shriek rang through the echoing place, and with the fall of her eidolon, the princess herself, till then standing like a statue in front of me, fell heavily, and lay still. I turned at once and went out: not again would I seek to restore her! As I stood trembling beside the cage, I knew that in the black ellipsoid I had been in the brain of the princess!--I saw the tail of the leopardess quiver once.

While still endeavouring to compose myself, I heard the voice of the princess beside me.

"Come now," she said; "I will show you what I want you to do for me."

She led the way into the court. I followed in dazed compliance.

The moon was near the zenith, and her present silver seemed brighter than the gold of the absent sun. She brought me through the trees to the tallest of them, the one in the centre. It was not quite like the rest, for its branches, drawing their ends together at the top, made a clump that looked from beneath like a fir-cone. The princess stood close under it, gazing up, and said, as if talking to herself,

"On the summit of that tree grows a tiny blossom which would at once heal my scratches! I might be a dove for a moment and fetch it, but I see a little snake in the leaves whose bite would be worse to a dove than the bite of a tiger to me!--How I hate that cat-woman!"

She turned to me quickly, saying with one of her sweetest smiles,

"Can you climb?"

The smile vanished with the brief question, and her face changed to a look of sadness and suffering. I ought to have left her to suffer, but the way she put her hand to her wounded neck went to my heart.

I considered the tree. All the way up to the branches, were projections on the stem like the remnants on a palm of its fallen leaves.

"I can climb that tree," I answered.

"Not with bare feet!" she returned.

In my haste to follow the leopardess disappearing, I had left my sandals in my room.

"It is no matter," I said; "I have long gone barefoot!"

Again I looked at the tree, and my eyes went wandering up the stem until my sight lost itself in the branches. The moon shone like silvery foam here and there on the rugged bole, and a little rush of wind went through the top with a murmurous sound as of water falling softly into water. I approached the tree to begin my ascent of it. The princess stopped me.

"I cannot let you attempt it with your feet bare!" she insisted. "A fall from the top would kill you!"

"So would a bite from the snake!" I answered--not believing, I confess, that there was any snake.

"It would not hurt YOU!" she replied. "--Wait a moment."

She tore from her garment the two wide borders that met in front, and kneeling on one knee, made me put first my left foot, then my right on the other, and bound them about with the thick embroidered strips.

"You have left the ends hanging, princess!" I said.

"I have nothing to cut them off with; but they are not long enough to get entangled," she replied.

I turned to the tree, and began to climb.

Now in Bulika the cold after sundown was not so great as in certain other parts of the country--especially about the sexton's cottage; yet when I had climbed a little way, I began to feel very cold, grew still colder as I ascended, and became coldest of all when I got among the branches. Then I shivered, and seemed to have lost my hands and feet.

There was hardly any wind, and the branches did not sway in the least, yet, as I approached the summit, I became aware of a peculiar unsteadiness: every branch on which I placed foot or laid hold, seemed on the point of giving way. When my head rose above the branches near the top, and in the open moonlight I began to look about for the blossom, that instant I found myself drenched from head to foot. The next, as if plunged in a stormy water, I was flung about wildly, and felt myself sinking. Tossed up and down, tossed this way and tossed that way, rolled over and over, checked, rolled the other way and tossed up again, I was sinking lower and lower. Gasping and gurgling and choking, I fell at last upon a solid bottom.

"I told you so!" croaked a voice in my ear.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I AM SILENCED

I rubbed the water out of my eyes, and saw the raven on the edge of a huge stone basin. With the cold light of the dawn reflected from his glossy plumage, he stood calmly looking down upon me. I lay on my back in water, above which, leaning on my elbows, I just lifted my face. I was in the basin of the large fountain constructed by my father in the middle of the lawn. High over me glimmered the thick, steel-shiny stalk, shooting, with a torrent uprush, a hundred feet into the air, to spread in a blossom of foam.

Nettled at the coolness of the raven's remark,

"You told me nothing!" I said.

"I told you to do nothing any one you distrusted asked you!"

"Tut! how was mortal to remember that?"

"You will not forget the consequences of having forgotten it!" replied Mr. Raven, who stood leaning over the margin of the basin, and stretched his hand across to me.

I took it, and was immediately beside him on the lawn, dripping and streaming.

"You must change your clothes at once!" he said. "A wetting does not signify where you come from--though at present such an accident is unusual; here it has its inconveniences!"

He was again a raven, walking, with something stately in his step, toward the house, the door of which stood open.

"I have not much to change!" I laughed; for I had flung aside my robe to climb the tree.

"It is a long time since I moulted a feather!" said the raven.

In the house no one seemed awake. I went to my room, found a dressing-gown, and descended to the library.

knowledge more dangerous than any amount of ignorance. To know all things would not be greatness."

"At least it was for love of them, not from cowardice that I served the giants!"

"Granted. But you ought to have served the Little Ones, not the giants! You ought to have given the Little Ones water; then they would soon have taught the giants their true position. In the meantime you could yourself have made the giants cut down two-thirds of their coarse fruit-trees to give room to the little delicate ones! You lost your chance with the Lovers, Mr. Vane! You speculated about them instead of helping them!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PERSIAN CAT

I sat in silence and shame. What he said was true: I had not been a wise neighbour to the Little Ones!

Mr. Raven resumed:

"You wronged at the same time the stupid creatures themselves. For them slavery would have been progress. To them a few such lessons as you could have given them with a stick from one of their own trees, would have been invaluable."

"I did not know they were cowards!"

"What difference does that make? The man who grounds his action on another's cowardice, is essentially a coward himself.--I fear worse will come of it! By this time the Little Ones might have been able to protect themselves from the princess, not to say the giants--they were always fit enough for that; as it was they laughed at them! but now, through your relations with her,----"

"I hate her!" I cried.

"Did you let her know you hated her?"

Again I was silent.

"Not even to her have you been faithful!--But hush! we were followed from the fountain, I fear!"

"No living creature did I see!--except a disreputable-looking cat that bolted into the shrubbery."

"It was a magnificent Persian--so wet and draggled, though, as to look what she was--worse than disreputable!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Raven?" I cried, a fresh horror taking me by the throat. "--There was a beautiful blue Persian about the house, but she fled at the very sound of water!--Could she have been after the goldfish?"

Although not once my breath had ever stirred
A hair of him, could trammel brain and spine
With rooted bonds which Death could not untwine--
Or life, though hope were evermore deferred."

Again he paused, again turned a leaf, and again began:--

"For by his side I lay, a bodiless thing;
I breathed not, saw not, felt not, only thought,
And made him love me--with a hungering
After he knew not what--if it was aught
Or but a nameless something that was wrought
By him out of himself; for I did sing

"A song that had no sound into his soul;
I lay a heartless thing against his heart,
Giving him nothing where he gave his whole
Being to clothe me human, every part:
That I at last into his sense might dart,
Thus first into his living mind I stole.

"Ah, who was ever conquering Love but I!
Who else did ever throne in heart of man!
To visible being, with a gladsome cry
Waking, life's tremor through me throbbing ran!"

A strange, repulsive feline wail arose somewhere in the room. I started up on my elbow and stared about me, but could see nothing.

Mr. Raven turned several leaves, and went on:--

"Sudden I woke, nor knew the ghastly fear
That held me--not like serpent coiled about,
But like a vapour moist, corrupt, and drear,
Filling heart, soul, and breast and brain throughout;
My being lay motionless in sickening doubt,
Nor dared to ask how came the horror here.

"My past entire I knew, but not my now;
I understood nor what I was, nor where;
I knew what I had been: still on my brow
I felt the touch of what no more was there!
I was a fainting, dead, yet live Despair;
A life that flouted life with mop and mow!

"That I was a queen I knew right well,
And sometimes wore a splendour on my head

Whose flashing even dead darkness could not quell--
The like on neck and arms and girdle-stead;
And men declared a light my closed eyes shed
That killed the diamond in its silver cell."

Again I heard the ugly cry of feline pain. Again I looked, but saw neither shape nor motion. Mr. Raven seemed to listen a moment, but again turned several pages, and resumed:--

"Hideously wet, my hair of golden hue
Fouled my fair hands: to have it swiftly shorn
I had given my rubies, all for me dug new--
No eyes had seen, and such no waist had worn!
For a draught of water from a drinking horn,
For one blue breath, I had given my sapphires blue!

"Nay, I had given my opals for a smock,
A peasant-maiden's garment, coarse and clean:
My shroud was rotting! Once I heard a cock
Lustily crow upon the hillock green
Over my coffin. Dulled by space between,
Came back an answer like a ghostly mock."

Once more arose the bestial wail.

"I thought some foul thing was in the room!" said the librarian, casting a glance around him; but instantly he turned a leaf or two, and again read:--

"For I had bathed in milk and honey-dew,
In rain from roses shook, that ne'er touched earth,
And ointed me with nard of amber hue;
Never had spot me spotted from my birth,
Or mole, or scar of hurt, or fret of dearth;
Never one hair superfluous on me grew.

"Fleeing cold whiteness, I would sit alone--
Not in the sun--I feared his bronzing light,
But in his radiance back around me thrown
By fulgent mirrors tempering his might;
Thus bathing in a moon-bath not too bright,
My skin I tinted slow to ivory tone.

"But now, all round was dark, dark all within!
My eyes not even gave out a phantom-flash;
My fingers sank in pulp through pulpy skin;
My body lay death-weltered in a mash
Of slimy horrors----"

With a fearsome yell, her clammy fur staring in clumps, her tail thick as a cable, her eyes flashing green as a chrysoprase, her distended claws entangling themselves so that she floundered across the carpet, a huge white cat rushed from somewhere, and made for the chimney. Quick as thought the librarian threw the manuscript between her and the hearth. She crouched instantly, her eyes fixed on the book. But his voice went on as if still he read, and his eyes seemed also fixed on the book:--

"Ah, the two worlds! so strangely are they one,
And yet so measurelessly wide apart!
Oh, had I lived the bodiless alone
And from defiling sense held safe my heart,
Then had I scaped the canker and the smart,
Scaped life-in-death, scaped misery's endless moan!"

At these words such a howling, such a prolonged yell of agony burst from the cat, that we both stopped our ears. When it ceased, Mr. Raven walked to the fire-place, took up the book, and, standing between the creature and the chimney, pointed his finger at her for a moment. She lay perfectly still. He took a half-burnt stick from the hearth, drew with it some sign on the floor, put the manuscript back in its place, with a look that seemed to say, "Now we have her, I think!" and, returning to the cat, stood over her and said, in a still, solemn voice:--

"Lilith, when you came here on the way to your evil will, you little thought into whose hands you were delivering yourself!-- Mr. Vane, when God created me,--not out of Nothing, as say the unwise, but out of His own endless glory--He brought me an angelic splendour to be my wife: there she lies! For her first thought was POWER; she counted it slavery to be one with me, and bear children for Him who gave her being. One child, indeed, she bore; then, puffed with the fancy that she had created her, would have me fall down and worship her! Finding, however, that I would but love and honour, never obey and worship her, she poured out her blood to escape me, fled to the army of the aliens, and soon had so ensnared the heart of the great Shadow, that he became her slave, wrought her will, and made her queen of Hell. How it is with her now, she best knows, but I know also. The one child of her body she fears and hates, and would kill, asserting a right, which is a lie, over what God sent through her into His new world. Of creating, she knows no more than the crystal that takes its allotted shape, or the worm that makes two worms when it is cloven asunder. Vilest of God's creatures, she lives by the blood and lives and souls of men. She consumes and slays, but is powerless to destroy as to create."

The animal lay motionless, its beryl eyes fixed flaming on the man: his eyes on hers held them fixed that they could not move from his.

"It is not on the leopard; it is in the woman!" he said. "Nor will it leave thee until it hath eaten to thy heart, and thy beauty hath flowed from thee through the open wound!"

She gave a glance downward, and shivered.

"Lilith," said Adam, and his tone had changed to a tender beseeching, "hear me, and repent, and He who made thee will cleanse thee!"

Her hand returned quivering to her side. Her face grew dark. She gave the cry of one from whom hope is vanishing. The cry passed into a howl. She lay writhing on the floor, a leopardess covered with spots.

"The evil thou meditatest," Adam resumed, "thou shalt never compass, Lilith, for Good and not Evil is the Universe. The battle between them may last for countless ages, but it must end: how will it fare with thee when Time hath vanished in the dawn of the eternal morn? Repent, I beseech thee; repent, and be again an angel of God!"

She rose, she stood upright, a woman once more, and said,

"I will not repent. I will drink the blood of thy child." My eyes were fastened on the princess; but when Adam spoke, I turned to him: he stood towering above her; the form of his visage was altered, and his voice was terrible.

"Down!" he cried; "or by the power given me I will melt thy very bones."

She flung herself on the floor, dwindled and dwindled, and was again a gray cat. Adam caught her up by the skin of her neck, bore her to the closet, and threw her in. He described a strange figure on the threshold, and closing the door, locked it.

Then he returned to my side the old librarian, looking sad and worn, and furtively wiping tears from his eyes.

CHAPTER XXX

ADAM EXPLAINS

"We must be on our guard," he said, "or she will again outwit us. She would befool the very elect!"

"How are we to be on our guard?" I asked.

"Every way," he answered. "She fears, therefore hates her child, and is in this house on her way to destroy her. The birth of children is in her eyes the death of their parents, and every new generation the enemy of the last. Her daughter appears to her an open channel through which her immortality--which yet she counts self-inherent--is flowing fast away: to fill it up, almost from her birth she has pursued her with an utter enmity. But the result of her machinations hitherto is, that in the region she claims as her own, has appeared a colony of children, to which that daughter is heart and head and sheltering wings. My Eve longed after the child, and would have been to her as a mother to her first-born, but we were then unfit to train her: she was carried into the wilderness, and for ages we knew nothing of her fate. But she was divinely fostered, and had young angels for her playmates; nor did she ever know care until she found a baby in the wood, and the mother-heart in her awoke. One by one she has found many children since, and that heart is not yet full. Her family is her absorbing charge, and never children were better mothered. Her authority over them is without appeal, but it is unknown to herself, and never comes to the surface except in watchfulness and service. She has forgotten the time when she lived without them, and thinks she came herself from the wood, the first of the family.

"You have saved the life of her and their enemy; therefore your life belongs to her and them. The princess was on her way to destroy them, but as she crossed that stream, vengeance overtook her, and she would have died had you not come to her aid. You did; and ere now she would have been raging among the Little Ones, had she dared again cross the stream. But there was yet a way to the blessed little colony through the world of the three dimensions; only, from that, by the slaying of her former body, she had excluded herself, and except in personal contact with one belonging to it, could not re-enter it. You provided the opportunity: never, in all her long years, had she had one before. Her hand, with lightest touch, was on one or other of your muffled feet, every step as you climbed. In that little chamber, she is now watching to leave it as soon as ever she may."

"She cannot know anything about the door!--she cannot at least know how to open it!" I said; but my heart was not so confident as my words.

"Hush, hush!" whispered the librarian, with uplifted hand; "she can hear through anything!--You must go at once, and make your way to my wife's cottage. I will remain to keep guard over her."

"Let me go to the Little Ones!" I cried.

"Beware of that, Mr. Vane. Go to my wife, and do as she tells you."

His advice did not recommend itself: why haste to encounter measureless delay? If not to protect the children, why go at all? Alas, even now I believed him only enough to ask him questions, not to obey him!

"Tell me first, Mr. Raven," I said, "why, of all places, you have shut her up there! The night I ran from your house, it was immediately into that closet!"

"The closet is no nearer our cottage, and no farther from it, than any or every other place."

"But," I returned, hard to persuade where I could not understand, "how is it then that, when you please, you take from that same door a whole book where I saw and felt only a part of one? The other part, you have just told me, stuck through into your library: when you put it again on the shelf, will it not again stick through into that? Must not then the two places, in which parts of the same volume can at the same moment exist, lie close together? Or can one part of the book be in space, or SOMEWHERE, and the other out of space, or NOWHERE?"

"I am sorry I cannot explain the thing to you," he answered; "but there is no provision in you for understanding it. Not merely, therefore, is the phenomenon inexplicable to you, but the very nature of it is inapprehensible by you. Indeed I but partially apprehend it myself. At the same time you are constantly experiencing things which you not only do not, but cannot understand. You think you understand them, but your understanding of them is only your being used to them, and therefore not surprised at them. You accept them, not because you understand them, but because you must accept them: they are there, and have unavoidable relations with you! The fact is, no man understands anything; when he knows he does not understand, that is his first tottering step--not toward understanding, but toward the capability of one day understanding. To such things as these you are not used, therefore you do not fancy you understand them. Neither I the goad, then will her day begin to dawn! Come; come! He who cannot act must make haste to sleep!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SEXTON'S OLD HORSE

I stood and watched the last gleam of the white leopardess melt away, then turned to follow my guide--but reluctantly. What had I to do with sleep? Surely reason was the same in every world, and what reason could there be in going to sleep with the dead, when the hour was calling the live man? Besides, no one would wake me, and how could I be certain of waking early--of waking at all?--the sleepers in that house let morning glide into noon, and noon into night, nor ever stirred! I murmured, but followed, for I knew not what else to do.

The librarian walked on in silence, and I walked silent as he. Time and space glided past us. The sun set; it began to grow dark, and I felt in the air the spreading cold of the chamber of death. My heart sank lower and lower. I began to lose sight of the lean, long-coated figure, and at length could no more hear his swishing stride through the heather. But then I heard instead the slow-flapping wings of the raven; and, at intervals, now a firefly, now a gleaming butterfly rose into the rayless air.

By and by the moon appeared, slow crossing the far horizon.

"You are tired, are you not, Mr. Vane?" said the raven, alighting on a stone. "You must make acquaintance with the horse that will carry you in the morning!"

He gave a strange whistle through his long black beak. A spot appeared on the face of the half-risen moon. To my ears came presently the drumming of swift, soft-galloping hoofs, and in a minute or two, out of the very disc of the moon, low-thundered the terrible horse. His mane flowed away behind him like the crest of a wind-fighting wave, torn seaward in hoary spray, and the whisk of his tail kept blinding the eye of the moon. Nineteen hands he seemed, huge of bone, tight of skin, hard of muscle--a steed the holy Death himself might choose on which to ride abroad and slay! The moon seemed to regard him with awe; in her scary light he looked a very skeleton, loosely roped together. Terrifically large, he moved with the lightness of a winged insect. As he drew near, his speed slackened, and his mane and tail drifted about him settling.

Now I was not merely a lover of horses, but I loved every horse I saw. I had never spent money except upon horses, and had never sold a horse. The sight of this mighty one, terrible to look at, woke in me longing to possess him. It was pure greed, nay, rank covetousness, an evil thing in all the worlds. I do not mean that I could have stolen him, but that, regardless of his proper place, I would have bought him if I could. I laid my hands on him, and stroked the protuberant bones that humped a hide smooth and thin, and shiny as satin--so shiny that the very shape of the moon was reflected in it; I fondled his sharp-pointed ears, whispered words in them, and breathed into his red nostrils the breath of a man's life. He in return breathed into mine the breath of a horse's life, and we loved one another. What eyes he had! Blue-filmy like the eyes of the dead, behind each was a glowing coal! The raven, with wings half extended, looked on pleased at my love-making to his magnificent horse.

"That is well! be friends with him," he said: "he will carry you all the better to-morrow!--Now we must hurry home!"

My desire to ride the horse had grown passionate.

"May I not mount him at once, Mr. Raven?" I cried.

"By all means!" he answered. "Mount, and ride him home."

The horse bent his head over my shoulder lovingly. I twisted my hands in his mane and scrambled onto his back, not without aid from certain protuberant bones.

"He would outspeed any leopard in creation!" I cried.

"Not that way at night," answered the raven; "the road is difficult.--But come; loss now will be gain then! To wait is harder than to run, and its meed is the fuller. Go on, my son--straight to the cottage. I shall be there as soon as you. It will rejoice my wife's heart to see son of hers on that horse!"

I sat silent. The horse stood like a block of marble.

"Why do you linger?" asked the raven.

"I long so much to ride after the leopardess," I answered, "that I can scarce restrain myself!"

"You have promised!"

"My debt to the Little Ones appears, I confess, a greater thing than my bond to you."

"Mr. Vane," croaked the raven, "think what you are doing! Twice already has evil befallen you--once from fear, and once from heedlessness: breach of word is far worse; it is a crime."

"The Little Ones are in frightful peril, and I brought it upon them!" I cried. "--But indeed I will not break my word to you. I will return, and spend in your house what nights--what days--what years you please."

"I tell you once more you will do them other than good if you go to-night," he insisted.

But a false sense of power, a sense which had no root and was merely vibrated into me from the strength of the horse, had, alas, rendered me too stupid to listen to anything he said!

"Would you take from me my last chance of reparation?" I cried. "This time there shall be no shirking! It is my duty, and I will go--if I perish for it!"

"Go, then, foolish boy!" he returned, with anger in his croak. "Take the horse, and ride to failure! May it be to humility!"

He spread his wings and flew. Again I pressed the lean ribs under me.

"After the spotted leopardess!" I whispered in his ear.

He turned his head this way and that, snuffing the air; then started, and went a few paces in a slow, undecided walk. Suddenly he quickened his walk; broke into a trot; began to gallop, and in a few moments his speed was tremendous. He seemed to see in the dark; never stumbled, not once faltered, not once hesitated. I sat as on the ridge of a wave. I felt under me the play of each individual muscle: his joints were so elastic, and his every movement glided so into the next, that not once did he jar me. His growing swiftness bore him along until he flew rather than ran. The wind met and passed us like a tornado.

Across the evil hollow we sped like a bolt from an arblast. No monster lifted its neck; all knew the hoofs that thundered over their heads! We rushed up the hills, we shot down their farther slopes; from the rocky chasms of the river-bed he did not swerve; he held on over them his fierce, terrible gallop. The moon, half-way up the heaven, gazed with a solemn trouble in her pale countenance. Rejoicing in the power of my steed and in the pride of my life, I sat like a king and rode.

We were near the middle of the many channels, my horse every other moment clearing one, sometimes two in his stride, and now and then gathering himself for a great bounding leap, when the moon reached the key-stone of her arch. Then came a wonder and a terror: she began to descend rolling like the nave of Fortune's wheel bowled by the gods, and went faster and faster. Like our own moon, this one had a human face, and now the broad forehead now the chin was uppermost as she rolled. I gazed aghast.

Across the ravines came the howling of wolves. An ugly fear began to invade the hollow places of my heart; my confidence was on the wane! The horse maintained his headlong swiftness, with ears pricked forward, and thirsty nostrils exulting in the wind his career created. But there was the moon jolting like an old chariot-wheel down the hill of heaven, with awful boding! She rolled at last over the horizon-edge and disappeared, carrying all her light with her.

The mighty steed was in the act of clearing a wide shallow channel when we were caught in the net of the darkness. His head dropped; its impetus carried his helpless bulk across, but he fell in a heap on the margin, and where he fell he lay. I got up, kneeled beside him, and felt him all over. Not a bone could I find broken, but he was a horse no more. I sat down on the body, and buried my face in my hands.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LOVERS AND THE BAGS

Bitterly cold grew the night. The body froze under me. The cry of the wolves came nearer; I heard their feet soft-padding on the rocky ground; their quick panting filled the air. Through the darkness I saw the many glowing eyes; their half-circle contracted around me. My time was come! I sprang to my feet.--Alas, I had not even a stick!

They came in a rush, their eyes flashing with fury of greed, their black throats agape to devour me. I stood hopelessly waiting them. One moment they halted over the horse--then came at me.

With a sound of swiftness all but silence, a cloud of green eyes came down on their flank. The heads that bore them flew at the wolves with a cry feebler yet fiercer than their howling snarl, and by the cry I knew them: they were cats, led by a huge gray one. I could see nothing of him but his eyes, yet I knew him--and so knew his colour and bigness. A terrific battle followed, whose tale alone came to me through the night. I would have fled, for surely it was but a fight which should have me!--only where was the use? my first step would be a fall! and my foes of either kind could both see and scent me in the dark!

All at once I missed the howling, and the caterwauling grew wilder. Then came the soft padding, and I knew it meant flight: the cats had defeated the wolves! In a moment the sharpest of sharp teeth were in my legs; a moment more and the cats were all over me in a live cataract, biting wherever they could bite, furiously scratching me anywhere and everywhere. A multitude clung to my body; I could not flee. Madly I fell on the hateful swarm, every finger instinct with destruction. I tore them off me, I throttled at them in vain: when I would have flung them from me, they clung to my hands like limpets. I trampled them under my feet, thrust my fingers in their eyes, caught them in jaws stronger than theirs, but could not rid myself of one. Without cease they kept discovering upon me space for fresh mouthfuls; they hauled at my skin with the widespread, horribly curved pincers of clutching claws; they hissed and spat in my face--but never touched it until, in my despair, I threw myself on the ground, when they forsook my body, and darted at my face. I rose, and immediately they left it, the more to occupy themselves with my legs. In an agony I broke from them and ran, careless whither, cleaving the solid dark. They accompanied me in a surrounding torrent, now rubbing, now leaping up against me, but tormenting me no more. When I fell, which was often, they gave me time to rise; when from fear of falling I slackened my pace, they flew afresh at my legs. All that miserable night they kept me running--but they drove me by a comparatively smooth path, for I tumbled into no gully, and passing the Evil Wood without seeing it, left it behind in the dark. When at length the morning appeared, I was beyond the channels, and on the verge of the orchard valley. In my joy I would have made friends with my persecutors, but not a cat was to be seen. I threw myself on the moss, and fell fast asleep.

I was waked by a kick, to find myself bound hand and foot, once more the thrall of the giants!

"What fitter?" I said to myself; "to whom else should I belong?" and I laughed in the triumph of self-disgust. A second kick stopped my false merriment; and thus recurrently assisted by my captors, I succeeded at length in rising to my feet.

Six of them were about me. They undid the rope that tied my legs together, attached a rope to each of them, and dragged me away. I walked as well as I could, but, as they frequently pulled both ropes at once, I fell repeatedly, whereupon they always kicked me up again. Straight to my old labour they took me, tied my leg-ropes to a tree, undid my arms, and put the hateful flint in my left hand. Then they lay down and pelted me with fallen fruit and stones, but seldom hit me. If I could have freed my legs, and got hold of a stick I spied a couple of yards from me, I would have fallen upon all six of them! "But the Little Ones will come at night!" I said to myself, and was comforted.

All day I worked hard. When the darkness came, they tied my hands, and left me fast to the tree. I slept a good deal, but woke often, and every time from a dream of lying in the heart of a heap of children. With the morning my enemies reappeared, bringing their kicks and their bestial company.

It was about noon, and I was nearly failing from fatigue and hunger, when I heard a sudden commotion in the brushwood, followed by a burst of the bell-like laughter so dear to my heart. I gave a loud cry of delight and welcome. Immediately rose a trumpeting as of baby-elephants, a neighing as of foals, and a bellowing as of calves, and through the bushes came a crowd of Little Ones, on diminutive horses, on small elephants, on little bears; but the noises came from the riders, not the animals. Mingled with the mounted ones walked the bigger of the boys and girls, among the latter a woman with a baby crowing in her arms. The giants sprang to their lumbering feet, but were instantly saluted with a storm of sharp stones; the horses charged their legs; the bears rose and hugged them at the waist; the elephants threw their trunks round their necks, pulled them down, and gave them such a trampling as they had sometimes given, but never received before. In a moment my ropes were undone, and I was in the arms, seemingly innumerable, of the Little Ones. For some time I saw no more of the giants.

They made me sit down, and my Lona came, and without a word began to feed me with the loveliest red and yellow fruits. I sat and ate, the whole colony mounting guard until I had done. Then they brought up two of the largest of their elephants, and having placed them side by side, hooked their trunks and tied their tails together. The docile creatures could have untied their tails with a single shake, and unhooked their trunks by forgetting them; but tails and trunks remained as their little masters had arranged them, and it was clear the elephants understood that they must keep their bodies parallel. I got up, and laid myself in the hollow between their two backs; when the wise animals, counteracting the weight that pushed them apart, leaned against each other, and made for me a most comfortable litter. My feet, it is true, projected beyond their tails, but my head lay pillowed on an ear of each. Then some of the smaller children, mounting for a bodyguard, ranged themselves in a row along the back of each of my bearers; the whole assembly formed itself in train; and the procession began to move.

Whither they were carrying me, I did not try to conjecture; I yielded myself to their pleasure, almost as happy as they. Chattering and laughing and playing glad tricks innumerable at first, the moment they saw I was going to sleep, they became still as judges.

I woke: a sudden musical uproar greeted the opening of my eyes.

We were travelling through the forest in which they found the babies, and which, as I had suspected, stretched all the way from the valley to the hot stream.

A tiny girl sat with her little feet close to my face, and looked down at me coaxingly for a while, then spoke, the rest seeming to hang on her words.

"We make a petisson to king," she said.

"What is it, my darling?" I asked.

"Sut eyes one minute," she answered.

"Certainly I will! Here goes!" I replied, and shut my eyes close.

"No, no! not fore I tell oo!" she cried.

I opened them again, and we talked and laughed together for quite another hour.

"Close eyes!" she said suddenly.

I closed my eyes, and kept them close. The elephants stood still. I heard a soft scurry, a little rustle, and then a silence--for in that world SOME silences ARE heard.

"Open eyes!" twenty voices a little way off shouted at once; but when I obeyed, not a creature was visible except the elephants that bore me. I knew the children marvellously quick in getting out of the way--the giants had taught them that; but when I raised myself, and looking about in the open shrubless forest, could descry neither hand nor heel, I stared in "blank astonishment."

The sun was set, and it was fast getting dark, yet presently a multitude of birds began to sing. I lay down to listen, pretty sure that, if I left them alone, the hiders would soon come out again.

The singing grew to a little storm of bird-voices. "Surely the children must have something to do with it!--And yet how could they set the birds singing?" I said to myself as I lay and listened. Soon, however, happening to look up into the tree under which my elephants stood, I thought I spied a little motion among the leaves, and looked more keenly. Sudden white spots appeared in the dark foliage, the music died down, a gale of childish laughter rippled the air, and white spots came out in every direction: the trees were full of children! In the wildest merriment they began to descend, some dropping from bough to bough so rapidly that I could scarce believe they had not fallen. I left my litter, and was instantly surrounded--a mark for all the artillery of their jubilant fun. With stately composure the elephants walked away to bed.

"But," said I, when their uproarious gladness had had scope for a while, "how is it that I never before heard you sing like the birds? Even when I thought it must be you, I could hardly believe it!"

"Ah," said one of the wildest, "but we were not birds then! We were run-creatures, not fly-creatures! We had our hide-places in the bushes then; but when we came to no-bushes, only trees, we had to build nests! When we built nests, we grew birds, and when we were birds, we had to do birds! We asked them to teach us their noises, and they taught us, and now we are real birds!--Come and see my nest. It's not big enough for king, but it's big enough for king to see me in it!"

I told him I could not get up a tree without the sun to show me the way; when he came, I would try.

"Kings seldom have wings!" I added.

"King! king!" cried one, "oo knows none of us hasn't no wings--foolis feddery tings! Arms and legs is better."

"That is true. I can get up without wings--and carry straws in my mouth too, to build my nest with!"

"Oo knows!" he answered, and went away sucking his thumb.

A moment after, I heard him calling out of his nest, a great way up a walnut tree of enormous size,

"Up adain, king! Dood night! I seepy!"

And I heard no more of him till he woke me in the morning.

CHAPTER XXXIII

LONA'S NARRATIVE

I lay down by a tree, and one and one or in little groups, the children left me and climbed to their nests. They were always so tired at night and so rested in the morning, that they were equally glad to go to sleep and to get up again. I, although tired also, lay awake: Lona had not bid me good night, and I was sure she would come.

I had been struck, the moment I saw her again, with her resemblance to the princess, and could not doubt her the daughter of whom Adam had told me; but in Lona the dazzling beauty of Lilith was softened by childlikeness, and deepened by the sense of motherhood. "She is occupied probably," I said to myself, "with the child of the woman I met fleeing!" who, she had already told me, was not half mother enough.

She came at length, sat down beside me, and after a few moments of silent delight, expressed mainly by stroking my face and hands, began to tell me everything that had befallen since I went. The moon appeared as we talked, and now and then, through the leaves, lighted for a quivering moment her beautiful face--full of thought, and a care whose love redeemed and glorified it. How such a child should have been born of such a mother--such a woman of such a princess, was hard to understand; but then, happily, she had two parents--say rather, three! She drew my heart by what in me was likest herself, and I loved her as one who, grow to what perfection she might, could only become the more a child. I knew now that I loved her when I left her, and that the hope of seeing her again had been my main comfort. Every word she spoke seemed to go straight to my heart, and, like the truth itself, make it purer.

She told me that after I left the orchard valley, the giants began to believe a little more in the actual existence of their neighbours, and became in consequence more hostile to them. Sometimes the Little Ones would see them trampling furiously, perceiving or imagining some indication of their presence, while they indeed stood beside, and laughed at their foolish rage. By and by, however, their animosity assumed a more practical shape: they began to destroy the trees on whose fruit the Little Ones lived. This drove the mother of them all to meditate counteraction. Setting the sharpest of them to listen at night, she learned that the giants thought I was hidden somewhere near, intending, as soon as I recovered my strength, to come in the dark and kill them sleeping. Thereupon she concluded that the only way to stop the destruction was to give them ground for believing that they had abandoned the place. The Little Ones must remove into the forest--beyond the range of the giants, but within reach of their own trees, which they must visit by night! The main objection to the plan was, that the forest had little or no undergrowth to shelter--or conceal them if necessary.

But she reflected that where birds, there the Little Ones could find habitation. They had eager sympathies with all modes of life, and could learn of the wildest creatures: why should they not take refuge from the cold and their enemies in the tree-tops? why not, having lain in the low brushwood, seek now the lofty foliage? why not build nests where it would not serve to scoop hollows? All that the birds could do, the Little Ones could learn--except, indeed, to fly!

She spoke to them on the subject, and they heard with approval. They could already climb the trees, and they had often watched the birds building their nests! The trees of the forest, although large, did not look bad! They went up much nearer the sky than those of the giants, and spread out their arms--some even stretched them down--as if inviting them to come and live with them! Perhaps, in the top of the tallest, they might find that bird that laid the baby-eggs, and sat upon them till they were ripe, then tumbled them down to let the little ones out! Yes; they would build sleep-houses in the trees, where no giant would see them, for never by any chance did one throw back his dull head to look up! Then the bad giants would be sure they had left the country, and the Little Ones would gather their own apples and pears and figs and mesples and peaches when they were asleep!

Thus reasoned the Lovers, and eagerly adopted Lona's suggestion--with the result that they were soon as much at home in the tree-tops as the birds themselves, and that the giants came ere long to the conclusion that they had frightened them out of the country--whereupon they forgot their trees, and again almost ceased to believe in the existence of their small neighbours.

Lona asked me whether I had not observed that many of the children were grown. I answered I had not, but could readily believe it. She assured me it was so, but said the certain evidence that their minds too had grown since their migration upward, had gone far in mitigation of the alarm the discovery had occasioned her.

In the last of the short twilight, and later when the moon was shining, they went down to the valley, and gathered fruit enough to serve them the next day; for the giants never went out in the twilight: that to them was darkness; and they hated the moon: had they been able, they would have extinguished her. But soon the Little Ones found that fruit gathered in the night was not altogether good the next day; so the question arose whether it would not be better, instead of pretending to have left the country, to make the bad giants themselves leave it.

They had already, she said, in exploring the forest, made acquaintance with the animals in it, and with most of them personally. Knowing therefore how strong as well as wise and docile some of them were, and how swift as well as manageable many others, they now set themselves to secure their aid against the giants, and with loving, playful approaches, had soon made more than friends of most of them, from the first addressing horse or elephant as Brother or Sister Elephant, Brother or Sister Horse, until before long they had an individual name for each. It was some little time longer before they said Brother or Sister Bear, but that came next, and the other day she had heard one little fellow cry, "Ah, Sister Serpent!" to a snake that bit him as he played with it too roughly. Most of them would have nothing to do with a caterpillar, except watch it through its changes; but when at length it came from its retirement with wings, all would immediately address it as Sister Butterfly, congratulating it on its metamorphosis--for which they used a word that meant something like REPENTANCE--and evidently regarding it as something sacred.

One moonlit evening, as they were going to gather their fruit, they came upon a woman seated on the ground with a baby in her lap--the woman I had met on my way to Bulika. They took her for a giantess that had stolen one of their babies, for they regarded all babies as their property. Filled with anger they fell upon her multitudinously, beating her after a childish, yet sufficiently bewildering fashion. She would have fled, but a boy threw himself down and held her by the feet. Recovering her wits, she recognised in her assailants the children whose hospitality she sought, and at once yielded the baby. Lona appeared, and carried it away in her bosom.

But while the woman noted that in striking her they were careful not to hurt the child, the Little Ones noted that, as she surrendered her, she hugged and kissed her just as they wanted to do, and came to the conclusion that she must be a giantess of the same kind as the good giant. The moment Lona had the baby, therefore, they brought the mother fruit, and began to show her every sort of childish attention.

Now the woman had been in perplexity whither to betake herself, not daring to go back to the city, because the princess was certain to find out who had lamed her leopardess: delighted with the friendliness of the little people, she resolved to remain with them for the present: she would have no trouble with her infant, and might find some way of returning to her husband, who was rich in money and gems, and very seldom unkind to her.

Here I must supplement, partly from conjecture, what Lona told me about the woman. With the rest of the inhabitants of Bulika, she was

"They think," answered Lona, "that, stupid as they are, the giants will search the wood, and they are gone to gather stones with which to receive them. Stones are not plentiful in the forest, and they have to scatter far to find enow. They will carry them to their nests, and from the trees attack the giants as they come within reach. Knowing their habits, they do not expect them before the morning. If they do come, it will be the opening of a war of expulsion: one or the other people must go. The result, however, is hardly doubtful. We do not mean to kill them; indeed, their skulls are so thick that I do not think we could!--not that killing would do them much harm; they are so little alive! If one were killed, his giantess would not remember him beyond three days!"

"Do the children then throw so well that the thing MIGHT happen?" I asked.

"Wait till you see them!" she answered, with a touch of pride. "--But I have not yet told you," she went on, "of a strange thing that happened the night before last!--We had come home from gathering our fruit, and were asleep in our nests, when we were roused by the horrid noises of beasts fighting. The moon was bright, and in a moment our trees glittered with staring little eyes, watching two huge leopardesses, one perfectly white, the other covered with black spots, which worried and tore each other with I do not know how many teeth and claws. To judge by her back, the spotted creature must have been climbing a tree when the other sprang upon her. When first I saw them, they were just under my own tree, rolling over and over each other. I got down on the lowest branch, and saw them perfectly. The children enjoyed the spectacle, siding some with this one, some with that, for we had never seen such beasts before, and thought they were only at play. But by degrees their roaring and growling almost ceased, and I saw that they were in deadly earnest, and heartily wished neither might be left able to climb a tree. But when the children saw the blood pouring from their flanks and throats, what do you think they did? They scurried down to comfort them, and gathering in a great crowd about the terrible creatures, began to pat and stroke them. Then I got down as well, for they were much too absorbed to heed my calling to them; but before I could reach them, the white one stopped fighting, and sprang among them with such a hideous yell that they flew up into the trees like birds. Before I got back into mine, the wicked beasts were at it again tooth and claw. Then Whitey had the best of it; Spotty ran away as fast as she could run, and Whitey came and lay down at the foot of my tree. But in a minute or two she was up again, and walking about as if she thought Spotty might be lurking somewhere. I waked often, and every time I looked out, I saw her. In the morning she went away."

"I know both the beasts," I said. "Spotty is a bad beast. She hates the children, and would kill every one of them. But Whitey loves them. She ran at them only to frighten them away, lest Spotty should get hold of any of them. No one needs be afraid of Whitey!"

"They are what they are without it!" she said: "when we have the city, we will search for water!"

We began, therefore, and pushed forward our preparations, constantly reviewing the merry troops and companies. Lona gave her attention chiefly to the commissariat, while I drilled the little soldiers, exercised them in stone-throwing, taught them the use of some other weapons, and did all I could to make warriors of them. The main difficulty was to get them to rally to their flag the instant the call was sounded. Most of them were armed with slings, some of the bigger boys with bows and arrows. The bigger girls carried aloe-spikes, strong as steel and sharp as needles, fitted to longish shafts--rather formidable weapons. Their sole duty was the charge of such as were too small to fight.

Lona had herself grown a good deal, but did not seem aware of it: she had always been, as she still was, the tallest! Her hair was much longer, and she was become almost a woman, but not one beauty of childhood had she outgrown. When first we met after our long separation, she laid down her infant, put her arms round my neck, and clung to me silent, her face glowing with gladness: the child whimpered; she sprang to him, and had him in her bosom instantly. To see her with any thoughtless, obstinate, or irritable little one, was to think of a tender grandmother. I seemed to have known her for ages--for always--from before time began! I hardly remembered my mother, but in my mind's eye she now looked like Lona; and if I imagined sister or child, invariably she had the face of Lona! My every imagination flew to her; she was my heart's wife! She hardly ever sought me, but was almost always within sound of my voice. What I did or thought, I referred constantly to her, and rejoiced to believe that, while doing her work in absolute independence, she was most at home by my side. Never for me did she neglect the smallest child, and my love only quickened my sense of duty. To love her and to do my duty, seemed, not indeed one, but inseparable. She might suggest something I should do; she might ask me what she ought to do; but she never seemed to suppose that I, any more than she, would like to do, or could care about anything except what must be done. Her love overflowed upon me--not in caresses, but in a closeness of recognition which I can compare to nothing but the devotion of a divine animal.

I never told her anything about her mother.

The wood was full of birds, the splendour of whose plumage, while it took nothing from their song, seemed almost to make up for the lack of flowers--which, apparently, could not grow without water. Their glorious feathers being everywhere about in the forest, it came into my heart to make from them a garment for Lona. While I gathered, and bound them in overlapping rows, she watched me with evident appreciation of my choice and arrangement, never asking what I was fashioning, but evidently waiting expectant the result of my work. In a week or two it was finished--a long loose mantle, to fasten at the throat and waist, with openings for the arms.

I rose and put it on her. She rose, took it off, and laid it at my feet--I imagine from a sense of propriety. I put it again on her shoulders, and showed her where to put her arms through. She smiled, looked at the feathers a little and stroked them--again took it off and laid it down, this time by her side. When she left me, she carried it with her, and I saw no more of it for some days. At length she came to me one morning wearing it, and carrying another garment which she had fashioned similarly, but of the dried leaves of a tough evergreen. It had the strength almost of leather, and the appearance of scale-armour. I put it on at once, and we always thereafter wore those garments when on horseback.

For, on the outskirts of the forest, had appeared one day a troop of full-grown horses, with which, as they were nowise alarmed at creatures of a shape so different from their own, I had soon made friends, and two of the finest I had trained for Lona and myself. Already accustomed to ride a small one, her delight was great when first she looked down from the back of an animal of the giant kind; and the horse showed himself proud of the burden he bore. We exercised them every day until they had such confidence in us as to obey instantly and fear nothing; after which we always rode them at parade and on the march.

The undertaking did indeed at times appear to me a foolhardy one, but the confidence of the woman of Bulika, real or simulated, always overcame my hesitancy. The princess's magic, she insisted, would prove powerless against the children; and as to any force she might muster, our animal-allies alone would assure our superiority: she was herself, she said, ready, with a good stick, to encounter any two men of Bulika. She confessed to not a little fear of the leopardess, but I was myself ready for her. I shrank, however, from carrying ALL the children with us.

"Would it not be better," I said, "that you remained in the forest with your baby and the smallest of the Little Ones?"

She answered that she greatly relied on the impression the sight of them would make on the women, especially the mothers.

"When they see the darlings," she said, "their hearts will be taken by storm; and I must be there encouraging them to make a stand! If there be a remnant of hardihood in the place, it will be found among the women!"

"YOU must not encumber yourself," I said to Lona, "with any of the children; you will be wanted everywhere!"

"You must mind, every one, to do immediately what your officers tell you!"

"We will, we will!--Now we're quite ready! Let us go!"

"Another thing you must not forget," I went on: "when you strike, be sure you make it a downright swinging blow; when you shoot an arrow, draw it to the head; when you sling a stone, sling it strong and straight."

"That we will!" they cried with jubilant, fearless shout.

"Perhaps you will be hurt!"

"We don't mind that!--Do we, boys?"

"Not a bit!"

"Some of you may very possibly be killed!" I said.

"I don't mind being killed!" cried one of the finest of the smaller boys: he rode a beautiful little bull, which galloped and jumped like a horse.

"I don't either! I don't either!" came from all sides.

Then Lona, queen and mother and sister of them all, spoke from her big horse by my side:

"I would give my life," she said, "to have my mother! She might kill me if she liked! I should just kiss her and die!"

"Come along, boys!" cried a girl. "We're going to our mothers!"

A pang went through my heart.--But I could not draw back; it would be moral ruin to the Little Ones!

Chapter XXXV

THE LITTLE ONES IN BULIKA

It was early in the morning when we set out, making, between the blue sky and the green grass, a gallant show on the wide plain. We would travel all the morning, and rest the afternoon; then go on at night, rest the next day, and start again in the short twilight. The latter part of our journey we would endeavour so to divide as to arrive at the city with the first of the morning, and be already inside the gates when discovered.

It seemed as if all the inhabitants of the forest would migrate with us. A multitude of birds flew in front, imagining themselves, no doubt, the leading division; great companies of butterflies and other insects played about our heads; and a crowd of four-footed creatures followed us. These last, when night came, left us almost all; but the birds and the butterflies, the wasps and the dragon-flies, went with us to the very gates of the city.

We halted and slept soundly through the afternoon: it was our first real march, but none were tired. In the night we went faster, because it was cold. Many fell asleep on the backs of their beasts, and woke in the morning quite fresh. None tumbled off. Some rode shaggy, shambling bears, which yet made speed enough, going as fast as the elephants. Others were mounted on different kinds of deer, and would have been racing all the way had I not prevented it. Those atop of the hay on the elephants, unable to see the animals below them, would keep talking to them as long as they were awake. Once, when we had halted to feed, I heard a little fellow, as he drew out the hay to give him, commune thus with his "darling beast":

"Nosy dear, I am digging you out of the mountain, and shall soon get down to you: be patient; I'm a coming! Very soon now you'll send up your nose to look for me, and then we'll kiss like good elephants, we will!"

The same night there burst out such a tumult of elephant-trumpeting, horse-neighing, and child-imitation, ringing far over the silent levels, that, uncertain how near the city might not be, I quickly stilled the uproar lest it should give warning of our approach.

"They are just bad giants!" said Lona, her eyes flashing as she drove her horse against one of unusual height who, having stirred up the little manhood in him, stood barring her way with a club. He dared not abide the shock, but slunk aside, and the next moment went down, struck by several stones. Another huge fellow, avoiding my charger, stepped suddenly, with a speech whose rudeness alone was intelligible, between me and the boy who rode behind me. The boy told him to address the king; the giant struck his little horse on the head with a hammer, and he fell. Before the brute could strike again, however, one of the elephants behind laid him prostrate, and trampled on him so that he did not attempt to get up until hundreds of feet had walked over him, and the army was gone by.

But at sight of the women what a dismay clouded the face of Lona! Hardly one of them was even pleasant to look upon! Were her darlings to find mothers among such as these?

Hardly had we halted in the central square, when two girls rode up in anxious haste, with the tidings that two of the boys had been hurried away by some women. We turned at once, and then first discovered that the woman we befriended had disappeared with her baby.

But at the same moment we descried a white leopardess come bounding toward us down a narrow lane that led from the square to the palace. The Little Ones had not forgotten the fight of the two leopardesses in the forest: some of them looked terrified, and their ranks began to waver; but they remembered the order I had just given them, and stood fast.

We stopped to see the result; when suddenly a small boy, called Odu, remarkable for his speed and courage, who had heard me speak of the goodness of the white leopardess, leaped from the back of his bear, which went shambling after him, and ran to meet her. The leopardess, to avoid knocking him down, pulled herself up so suddenly that she went rolling over and over: when she recovered her feet she found the child on her back. Who could doubt the subjugation of a people which saw an urchin of the enemy bestride an animal of which they lived in daily terror? Confident of the effect on the whole army, we rode on.

As we stopped at the house to which our guides led us, we heard a scream; I sprang down, and thundered at the door. My horse came and pushed me away with his nose, turned about, and had begun to batter the door with his heels, when up came little Odu on the leopardess, and at sight of her he stood still, trembling. But she too had heard the cry, and forgetting the child on her back, threw herself at the door; the boy was dashed against it, and fell senseless. Before I could reach him, Lona had him in her arms, and as soon as he came to himself, set him on the back of his bear, which had still followed him.

When the leopardess threw herself the third time against the door, it gave way, and she darted in. We followed, but she had already vanished. We sprang up a stair, and went all over the house, to find no one. Darting down again, we spied a door under the stair, and got into a labyrinth of excavations. We had not gone far, however, when we met the leopardess with the child we sought across her back.

He told us that the woman he took for his mother threw him into a hole, saying she would give him to the leopardess. But the leopardess was a good one, and took him out.

Following in search of the other boy, we got into the next house more easily, but to find, alas, that we were too late: one of the savages had just killed the little captive! It consoled Lona, however, to learn which he was, for she had been expecting him to grow a bad giant, from which worst of fates death had saved him. The leopardess sprang upon his murderer, took him by the throat, dragged him into the street, and followed Lona with him, like a cat with a great rat in her jaws.

"Let us leave the horrible place," said Lona; "there are no mothers here! This people is not worth delivering."

The leopardess dropped her burden, and charged into the crowd, this way and that, wherever it was thickest. The slaves cried out and ran, tumbling over each other in heaps.

When we got back to the army, we found it as we had left it, standing in order and ready.

But I was far from easy: the princess gave no sign, and what she might be plotting we did not know! Watch and ward must be kept the night through!

The Little Ones were such hardy creatures that they could repose anywhere: we told them to lie down with their animals where they were, and sleep till they were called. In one moment they were down, and in another lapt in the music of their sleep, a sound as of water over grass, or a soft wind among leaves. Their animals slept more lightly, ever on the edge of waking. The bigger boys and girls walked softly hither and thither among the dreaming multitude. All was still; the whole wicked place appeared at rest.

CHAPTER XXXVI

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

Lona was so disgusted with the people, and especially with the women, that she wished to abandon the place as soon as possible; I, on the contrary, felt very strongly that to do so would be to fail wilfully where success was possible; and, far worse, to weaken the hearts of the Little Ones, and so bring them into much greater danger. If we retreated, it was certain the princess would not leave us unassailed! if we encountered her, the hope of the prophecy went with us! Mother and daughter must meet: it might be that Lona's loveliness would take Lilith's heart by storm! if she threatened violence, I should be there between them! If I found that I had no other power over her, I was ready, for the sake of my Lona, to strike her pitilessly on the closed hand! I knew she was doomed: most likely it was decreed that her doom should now be brought to pass through us!

Still without hint of the relation in which she stood to the princess, I stated the case to Lona as it appeared to me. At once she agreed to accompany me to the palace.

From the top of one of its great towers, the princess had, in the early morning, while the city yet slept, descried the approach of the army of the Little Ones. The sight awoke in her an over-mastering terror: she had failed in her endeavour to destroy them, and they were upon her! The prophecy was about to be fulfilled!

When she came to herself, she descended to the black hall, and seated herself in the north focus of the ellipse, under the opening in the roof.

For she must think! Now what she called THINKING required a clear consciousness of herself, not as she was, but as she chose to believe herself; and to aid her in the realisation of this consciousness, she had suspended, a little way from and above her, itself invisible in the darkness of the hall, a mirror to receive the full sunlight reflected from her person. For the resulting vision of herself in the splendour of her beauty, she sat waiting the meridional sun.

For us, we saw a splendour, a glorious woman centring the dark. Lona sprang from her horse, and bounded to her. I sprang from mine, and followed Lona.

"Mother! mother!" she cried, and her clear, lovely voice echoed in the dome.

The princess shivered; her face grew almost black with hate, her eyebrows met on her forehead. She rose to her feet, and stood.

"Mother! mother!" cried Lona again, as she leaped on the daïs, and flung her arms around the princess.

An instant more and I should have reached them!--in that instant I saw Lona lifted high, and dashed on the marble floor. Oh, the horrible sound of her fall! At my feet she fell, and lay still. The princess sat down with the smile of a demoness.

I dropped on my knees beside Lona, raised her from the stones, and pressed her to my bosom. With indignant hate I glanced at the princess; she answered me with her sweetest smile. I would have sprung upon her, taken her by the throat, and strangled her, but love of the child was stronger than hate of the mother, and I clasped closer my precious burden. Her arms hung helpless; her blood trickled over my hands, and fell on the floor with soft, slow little plashes.

The horses scented it--mine first, then the small ones. Mine reared, shivering and wild-eyed, went about, and thundered blindly down the dark hall, with the little horses after him. Lona's stood gazing down at his mistress, and trembling all over. The boys flung themselves from their horses' backs, and they, not seeing the black wall before them, dashed themselves, with mine, to pieces against it. The elephants came on to the foot of the daïs, and stopped, wildly trumpeting; the Little Ones sprang upon it, and stood horrified; the princess lay back in her seat, her face that of a corpse, her eyes alone alive, wickedly flaming. She was again withered and wasted to what I found in the wood, and her side was as if a great branding hand had been laid upon it. But Lona saw nothing, and I saw but Lona.

"Mother! mother!" she sighed, and her breathing ceased.

I carried her into the court: the sun shone upon a white face, and the pitiful shadow of a ghostly smile. Her head hung back. She was "dead as earth."

I forgot the Little Ones, forgot the murdering princess, forgot the body in my arms, and wandered away, looking for my Lona. The doors and windows were crowded with brute-faces jeering at me, but not daring to speak, for they saw the white leopardess behind me, hanging her head close at my heel. I spurned her with my foot. She held back a moment, and followed me again.

I reached the square: the little army was gone! Its emptiness roused me. Where were the Little Ones, HER Little Ones? I had lost her children! I stared helpless about me, staggered to the pillar, and sank upon its base.

But as I sat gazing on the still countenance, it seemed to smile a live momentary smile. I never doubted it an illusion, yet believed what it said: I should yet see her alive! It was not she, it was I who was lost, and she would find me!

I rose to go after the Little Ones, and instinctively sought the gate by which we had entered. I looked around me, but saw nothing of the leopardess.

The street was rapidly filling with a fierce crowd. They saw me encumbered with my dead, but for a time dared not assail me. Ere I reached the gate, however, they had gathered courage. The women began to hustle me; I held on heedless. A man pushed against my sacred burden: with a kick I sent him away howling. But the crowd pressed upon me, and fearing for the dead that was beyond hurt, I clasped my treasure closer, and freed my right arm. That instant, however, a commotion arose in the street behind me; the crowd broke; and through it came the Little Ones I had left in the palace. Ten of them were upon four of the elephants; on the two other elephants lay the princess, bound hand and foot, and quite still, save that her eyes rolled in their ghastly sockets. The two other Little Ones rode behind her on Lona's horse. Every now and then the wise creatures that bore her threw their trunks behind and felt her cords.

I walked on in front, and out of the city. What an end to the hopes with which I entered the evil place! We had captured the bad princess, and lost our all-beloved queen! My life was bare! my heart was empty!

"That cannot be! they said she was beautiful!"

"Indeed it is the princess!" I interposed. "Wickedness has made her ugly!"

She heard, and what a look was hers!

"It was very wrong of me to run away!" said Odu thoughtfully.

"What made you run away?" I asked. "I expected to find you where I left you!"

He did not reply at once.

"I don't know what made me run," answered another. "I was frightened!"

"It was a man that came down the hill from the palace," said a third.

"How did he frighten you?"

"I don't know."

"He wasn't a man," said Odu; "he was a shadow; he had no thick to him!"

"Tell me more about him."

"He came down the hill very black, walking like a bad giant, but spread flat. He was nothing but blackness. We were frightened the moment we saw him, but we did not run away; we stood and watched him. He came on as if he would walk over us. But before he reached us, he began to spread and spread, and grew bigger end bigger, till at last he was so big that he went out of our sight, and we saw him no more, and then he was upon us!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"He was all black through between us, and we could not see one another; and then he was inside us."

"How did you know he was inside you?"

"He did me quite different. I felt like bad. I was not Odu any more--not the Odu I knew. I wanted to tear Sozo to pieces--not really, but like!"

He turned and hugged Sozo.

"It wasn't me, Sozo," he sobbed. "Really, deep down, it was Odu, loving you always! And Odu came up, and knocked Naughty away. I grew sick, and thought I must kill myself to get out of the black. Then came a horrible laugh that had heard my think, and it set the air trembling about me. And then I suppose I ran away, but I did not know I had run away until I found myself running, fast as could, and all the rest running too. I would have stopped, but I never thought of it until I was out of the gate among the grass. Then I knew that I had run away from a shadow that wanted to be me and wasn't, and that I was the Odu that loved Sozo. It was the shadow that got into me, and hated him from inside me; it was not my own self me! And now I know that I ought not to have run away! But indeed I did not quite know what I was doing until it was done! My legs did it, I think: they grew frightened, and forgot me, and ran away! Naughty legs! There! and there!"

Thus ended Odu, with a kick to each of his naughty legs.

"What became of the shadow?" I asked.

"I do not know," he answered. "I suppose he went home into the night where there is no moon."

I fell a wondering where Lona was gone, and dropping on the grass, took the dead thing in my lap, and whispered in its ear, "Where are you, Lona? I love you!" But its lips gave no answer. I kissed them, not quite cold, laid the body down again, and appointing a guard over it, rose to provide for the safety of Lona's people during the night.

Before the sun went down, I had set a watch over the princess outside the camp, and sentinels round it: intending to walk about it myself all night long, I told the rest of the army to go to sleep. They threw themselves on the grass and were asleep in a moment.

When the moon rose I caught a glimpse of something white; it was the leopardess. She swept silently round the sleeping camp, and I saw her pass three times between the princess and the Little Ones. Thereupon I made the watch lie down with the others, and stretched myself beside the body of Lona.

the great clusters, at once they knew them good, rushed upon them, ate eagerly, and in a few minutes were all fast asleep on the green floor and in the forest around the hall. Hoping again to see the dance, and expecting the Little Ones to sleep through it, I had made them leave a wide space in the middle. I lay down among them, with Lona by my side, but did not sleep.

The night came, and suddenly the company was there. I was wondering with myself whether, night after night, they would thus go on dancing to all eternity, and whether I should not one day have to join them because of my stiff-neckedness, when the eyes of the children came open, and they sprang to their feet, wide awake. Immediately every one caught hold of a dancer, and away they went, bounding and skipping. The spectres seemed to see and welcome them: perhaps they knew all about the Little Ones, for they had themselves long been on their way back to childhood! Anyhow, their innocent gambols must, I thought, bring refreshment to weary souls who, their present taken from them and their future dark, had no life save the shadow of their vanished past. Many a merry but never a rude prank did the children play; and if they did at times cause a momentary jar in the rhythm of the dance, the poor spectres, who had nothing to smile withal, at least manifested no annoyance.

Just ere the morning began to break, I started to see the skeleton-princess in the doorway, her eyes open and glowing, the fearful spot black on her side. She stood for a moment, then came gliding in, as if she would join the dance. I sprang to my feet. A cry of repugnant fear broke from the children, and the lights vanished. But the low moon looked in, and I saw them clinging to each other. The ghosts were gone--at least they were no longer visible. The princess too had disappeared. I darted to the spot where I had left her: she lay with her eyes closed, as if she had never moved. I returned to the hall. The Little Ones were already on the floor, composing themselves to sleep.

The next morning, as we started, we spied, a little way from us, two skeletons moving about in a thicket. The Little Ones broke their ranks, and ran to them. I followed; and, although now walking at ease, without splint or ligature, I was able to recognise the pair I had before seen in that neighbourhood. The children at once made friends with them, laying hold of their arms, and stroking the bones of their long fingers; and it was plain the poor creatures took their attentions kindly. The two seemed on excellent terms with each other. Their common deprivation had drawn them together! the loss of everything had been the beginning of a new life to them!

Perceiving that they had gathered handfuls of herbs, and were looking for more--presumably to rub their bones with, for in what other way could nourishment reach their system so rudimentary?--the Little Ones, having keenly examined those they held, gathered of the same sorts, and filled the hands the skeletons held out to receive them. Then they bid them goodbye, promising to come and see them again, and resumed their journey, saying to each other they had not known there were such nice people living in the same forest.

When we came to the nest-village, I remained there a night with them, to see them resettled; for Lona still looked like one just dead, and there seemed no need of haste.

The princess had eaten nothing, and her eyes remained shut: fearing she might die ere we reached the end of our journey, I went to her in the night, and laid my bare arm upon her lips. She bit into it so fiercely that I cried out. How I got away from her I do not know, but I came to myself lying beyond her reach. It was then morning, and immediately I set about our departure.

Choosing twelve Little Ones, not of the biggest and strongest, but of the sweetest and merriest, I mounted them on six elephants, and took two more of the wise CLUMSIES, as the children called them, to bear the princess. I still rode Lona's horse, and carried her body wrapt in her cloak before me. As nearly as I could judge I took the direct way, across the left branch of the river-bed, to the House of Bitterness, where I hoped to learn how best to cross the broader and rougher branch, and how to avoid the basin of monsters: I dreaded the former for the elephants, the latter for the children.

I had one terrible night on the way--the third, passed in the desert between the two branches of the dead river.

We had stopped the elephants in a sheltered place, and there let the princess slip down between them, to lie on the sand until the morning. She seemed quite dead, but I did not think she was. I laid myself a little way from her, with the body of Lona by my other side, thus to keep watch at once over the dead and the dangerous. The moon was half-way down the west, a pale, thoughtful moon, mottling the desert with shadows. Of a sudden she was eclipsed, remaining visible, but sending forth no light: a thick, diaphanous film covered her patient beauty, and she looked troubled. The film swept a little aside, and I saw the edge of it against her clearness--the jagged outline of a bat-like wing, torn and hooked. Came a cold wind with a burning sting--and Lilith was upon me. Her hands were still bound, but with her teeth she pulled from my shoulder the cloak Lona made for me, and fixed them in my flesh. I lay as one paralysed.

Already the very life seemed flowing from me into her, when I remembered, and struck her on the hand. She raised her head with a gurgling shriek, and I felt her shiver. I flung her from me, and sprang to my feet.

She was on her knees, and rocked herself to and fro. A second blast of hot-stinging cold enveloped us; the moon shone out clear, and I saw her face--gaunt and ghastly, besmeared with red.

"Down, devil!" I cried.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, with the voice of a dull echo from a sepulchre.

"To your first husband," I answered.

"He will kill me!" she moaned.

"At least he will take you off my hands!"

"Give me my daughter," she suddenly screamed, grinding her teeth.

"Never! Your doom is upon you at last!"

"Loose my hands for pity's sake!" she groaned. "I am in torture. The cords are sunk in my flesh."

"I dare not. Lie down!" I said.

She threw herself on the ground like a log.

The rest of the night passed in peace, and in the morning she again seemed dead.

Before evening we came in sight of the House of Bitterness, and the next moment one of the elephants came alongside of my horse.

"Please, king, you are not going to that place?" whispered the Little One who rode on his neck.

"Indeed I am! We are going to stay the night there," I answered.

"Oh, please, don't! That must be where the cat-woman lives!"

"If you had ever seen her, you would not call her by that name!"

"Nobody ever sees her: she has lost her face! Her head is back and side all round."

"She hides her face from dull, discontented people!--Who taught you to call her the cat-woman?"

"I heard the bad giants call her so."

"What did they say about her?"

"I am sure she will never be unkind to you, even if she do hurt you!"

They were silent for a while.

"I'm not afraid of being hurt--a little!--a good deal!" cried Odu. "But I should not like scratches in the dark! The giants say the cat-woman has claw-feet all over her house!"

"I am taking the princess to her," I said.

"Why?"

"Because she is her friend."

"How can she be good then?"

"Little Tumbledown is a friend of the princess," I answered; "so is Luva: I saw them both, more than once, trying to feed her with grapes!"

"Little Tumbledown is good! Luva is very good!"

"That is why they are her friends."

"Will the cat-woman--I mean the woman that isn't the cat-woman, and has no claws to her toes--give her grapes?"

"She is more likely to give her scratches!"

"Why?--You say she is her friend!"

"That is just why.--A friend is one who gives us what we need, and the princess is sorely in need of a terrible scratching."

They were silent again.

"If any of you are afraid," I said, "you may go home; I shall not prevent you. But I cannot take one with me who believes the giants rather than me, or one who will call a good lady the cat-woman!"

"Please, king," said one, "I'm so afraid of being afraid!"

"My boy," I answered, "there is no harm in being afraid. The only harm is in doing what Fear tells you. Fear is not your master! Laugh in his face and he will run away."

"There she is--in the door waiting for us!" cried one, and put his hands over his eyes.

"How ugly she is!" cried another, and did the same.

"You do not see her," I said; "her face is covered!"

"She has no face!" they answered.

"She has a very beautiful face. I saw it once.--It is indeed as beautiful as Lona's!" I added with a sigh.

"Then what makes her hide it?"

"I think I know:--anyhow, she has some good reason for it!"

"I don't like the cat-woman! she is frightful!"

"You cannot like, and you ought not to dislike what you have never seen.--Once more, you must not call her the cat-woman!"

"What are we to call her then, please?"

"Lady Mara."

"That is a pretty name!" said a girl; "I will call her `lady Mara'; then perhaps she will show me her beautiful face!"

Mara, drest and muffled in white, was indeed standing in the doorway to receive us.

"At last!" she said. "Lilith's hour has been long on the way, but it is come! Everything comes. Thousands of years have I waited--and not in vain!"

She came to me, took my treasure from my arms, carried it into the house, and returning, took the princess. Lilith shuddered, but made no resistance. The beasts lay down by the door. We followed our hostess, the Little Ones looking very grave. She laid the princess on a rough settle at one side of the room, unbound her, and turned to us.

"Mr. Vane," she said, "and you, Little Ones, I thank you! This woman would not yield to gentler measures; harder must have their turn. I must do what I can to make her repent!"

The pitiful-hearted Little Ones began to sob sorely.

"Will you hurt her very much, lady Mara?" said the girl I have just mentioned, putting her warm little hand in mine.

"Yes; I am afraid I must; I fear she will make me!" answered Mara. "It would be cruel to hurt her too little. It would have all to be done again, only worse."

"May I stop with her?"

"No, my child. She loves no one, therefore she cannot be WITH any one. There is One who will be with her, but she will not be with Him."

"Will the shadow that came down the hill be with her?"

"The great Shadow will be in her, I fear, but he cannot be WITH her, or with any one. She will know I am beside her, but that will not comfort her."

"Will you scratch her very deep?" asked Odu, going near, and putting his hand in hers. "Please, don't make the red juice come!"

She caught him up, turned her back to the rest of us, drew the muffling down from her face, and held him at arms' length that he might see her.

As if his face had been a mirror, I saw in it what he saw. For one moment he stared, his little mouth open; then a divine wonder arose in his countenance, and swiftly changed to intense delight. For a minute he gazed entranced, then she set him down. Yet a moment he stood looking up at her, lost in contemplation--then ran to us with the face of a prophet that knows a bliss he cannot tell. Mara rearranged her mufflings, and turned to the other children.

"You must eat and drink before you go to sleep," she said; "you have had a long journey!"

She set the bread of her house before them, and a jug of cold water. They had never seen bread before, and this was hard and dry, but they ate it without sign of distaste. They had never seen water before, but they drank without demur, one after the other looking up from the draught with a face of glad astonishment. Then she led away the smallest, and the rest went trooping after her. With her own gentle hands, they told me, she put them to bed on the floor of the garret.

shape the thing further: sounds they were not, yet they were words to me.

"I will not," she said. "I will be myself and not another!"

"Alas, you are another now, not yourself! Will you not be your real self?"

"I will be what I mean myself now."

"If you were restored, would you not make what amends you could for the misery you have caused?"

"I would do after my nature."

"You do not know it: your nature is good, and you do evil!"

"I will do as my Self pleases--as my Self desires."

"You will do as the Shadow, overshadowing your Self inclines you?"

"I will do what I will to do."

"You have killed your daughter, Lilith!"

"I have killed thousands. She is my own!"

"She was never yours as you are another's."

"I am not another's; I am my own, and my daughter is mine."

"Then, alas, your hour is come!"

"I care not. I am what I am; no one can take from me myself!"

"You are not the Self you imagine."

"So long as I feel myself what it pleases me to think myself, I care not. I am content to be to myself what I would be. What I choose to seem to myself makes me what I am. My own thought makes me me; my own thought of myself is me. Another shall not make me!"

"But another has made you, and can compel you to see what you have made yourself. You will not be able much longer to look to yourself anything but what he sees you! You will not much longer have satisfaction in the thought of yourself. At this moment you are aware of the coming change!"

"No one ever made me. I defy that Power to unmake me from a free woman! You are his slave, and I defy you! You may be able to torture me--I do not know, but you shall not compel me to anything against my will!"

"Such a compulsion would be without value. But there is a light that goes deeper than the will, a light that lights up the darkness behind it: that light can change your will, can make it truly yours and not another's--not the Shadow's. Into the created can pour itself the creating will, and so redeem it!"

"That light shall not enter me: I hate it!--Begone, slave!"

"I am no slave, for I love that light, and will with the deeper will which created mine. There is no slave but the creature that wills against its creator. Who is a slave but her who cries, `I am free,' yet cannot cease to exist!"

"You speak foolishness from a cowering heart! You imagine me given over to you: I defy you! I hold myself against you! What I choose to be, you cannot change. I will not be what you think me--what you say I am!"

"I am sorry: you must suffer!"

"But be free!"

"She alone is free who would make free; she loves not freedom who would enslave: she is herself a slave. Every life, every will, every heart that came within your ken, you have sought to subdue: you are the slave of every slave you have made--such a slave that you do not know it!--See your own self!"

She took her hand from the head of the princess, and went two backward paces from her.

A soundless presence as of roaring flame possessed the house-- the same, I presume, that was to the children a silent wind. Involuntarily I turned to the hearth: its fire was a still small moveless glow. But I saw the worm-thing come creeping out, white-hot, vivid as incandescent silver, the live heart of essential fire. Along the floor it crawled toward the settle, going very slow. Yet more slowly it crept up on it, and laid itself, as unwilling to go further, at the feet of the princess. I rose and stole nearer. Mara stood motionless, as one that waits an event foreknown. The shining thing crawled on to a bare bony foot: it showed no suffering, neither was the settle scorched where the worm had lain. Slowly, very slowly, it crept along her robe until it reached her bosom, where it disappeared among the folds.

The face of the princess lay stonily calm, the eyelids closed as over dead eyes; and for some minutes nothing followed. At length, on the dry, parchment-like skin, began to appear drops as of the finest dew: in a moment they were as large as seed-pearls, ran together, and began to pour down in streams. I darted forward to snatch the worm from the poor withered bosom, and crush it with my foot. But Mara, Mother of Sorrow, stepped between, and drew aside the closed edges of the robe: no serpent was there--no searing trail; the creature had passed in by the centre of the black spot, and was piercing through the joints and marrow to the thoughts and intents of the heart. The princess gave one writhing, contorted shudder, and I knew the worm was in her secret chamber.

"She is seeing herself!" said Mara; and laying her hand on my arm, she drew me three paces from the settle.

Of a sudden the princess bent her body upward in an arch, then sprang to the floor, and stood erect. The horror in her face made me tremble lest her eyes should open, and the sight of them overwhelm me. Her bosom heaved and sank, but no breath issued. Her hair hung and dripped; then it stood out from her head and emitted sparks; again hung down, and poured the sweat of her torture on the floor.

I would have thrown my arms about her, but Mara stopped me.

"You cannot go near her," she said. "She is far away from us, afar in the hell of her self-consciousness. The central fire of the universe is radiating into her the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge of what she is. She sees at last the good she is not, the evil she is. She knows that she is herself the fire in which she is burning, but she does not know that the Light of Life is the heart of that fire. Her torment is that she is what she is. Do not fear for her; she is not forsaken. No gentler way to help her was left. Wait and watch."

It may have been five minutes or five years that she stood thus--I cannot tell; but at last she flung herself on her face.

Mara went to her, and stood looking down upon her. Large tears fell from her eyes on the woman who had never wept, and would not weep.

"Will you change your way?" she said at length.

"Why did he make me such?" gasped Lilith. "I would have made myself--oh, so different! I am glad it was he that made me and not I myself! He alone is to blame for what I am! Never would I have made such a worthless thing! He meant me such that I might know it and be miserable! I will not be made any longer!"

"Unmake yourself, then," said Mara.

"Alas, I cannot! You know it, and mock me! How often have I not agonised to cease, but the tyrant keeps me being! I curse him!--Now let him kill me!"

Self-loathing is not sorrow. Yet it is good, for it marks a step in the way home, and in the father's arms the prodigal forgets the self he abominates. Once with his father, he is to himself of no more account. It will be so with her."

She went nearer and said,

"Will you restore that which you have wrongfully taken?"

"I have taken nothing," answered the princess, forcing out the words in spite of pain, "that I had not the right to take. My power to take manifested my right."

Mara left her.

Gradually my soul grew aware of an invisible darkness, a something more terrible than aught that had yet made itself felt. A horrible Nothingness, a Negation positive infolded her; the border of its being that was yet no being, touched me, and for one ghastly instant I seemed alone with Death Absolute! It was not the absence of everything I felt, but the presence of Nothing. The princess dashed herself from the settle to the floor with an exceeding great and bitter cry. It was the recoil of Being from Annihilation.

"For pity's sake," she shrieked, "tear my heart out, but let me live!"

With that there fell upon her, and upon us also who watched with her, the perfect calm as of a summer night. Suffering had all but reached the brim of her life's cup, and a hand had emptied it! She raised her head, half rose, and looked around her. A moment more, and she stood erect, with the air of a conqueror: she had won the battle! Dareful she had met her spiritual foes; they had withdrawn defeated! She raised her withered arm above her head, a pæan of unholy triumph in her throat--when suddenly her eyes fixed in a ghastly stare.--What was she seeing?

I looked, and saw: before her, cast from unseen heavenly mirror, stood the reflection of herself, and beside it a form of splendent beauty, She trembled, and sank again on the floor helpless. She knew the one what God had intended her to be, the other what she had made herself.

The rest of the night she lay motionless altogether.

With the gray dawn growing in the room, she rose, turned to Mara, and said, in prideful humility, "You have conquered. Let me go into the wilderness and bewail myself."

Mara saw that her submission was not feigned, neither was it real. She looked at her a moment, and returned:

"Begin, then, and set right in the place of wrong."

"I know not how," she replied--with the look of one who foresaw and feared the answer.

"Open thy hand, and let that which is in it go."

A fierce refusal seemed to struggle for passage, but she kept it prisoned.

"I cannot," she said. "I have no longer the power. Open it for me."

She held out the offending hand. It was more a paw than a hand. It seemed to me plain that she could not open it.

Mara did not even look at it.

"You must open it yourself," she said quietly.

"I have told you I cannot!"

"You can if you will--not indeed at once, but by persistent effort. What you have done, you do not yet wish undone--do not yet intend to undo!"

"You think so, I dare say," rejoined the princess with a flash of insolence, "but I KNOW that I cannot open my hand!"

"I know you better than you know yourself, and I know you can. You have often opened it a little way. Without trouble and pain you cannot open it quite, but you CAN open it. At worst you could beat it open! I pray you, gather your strength, and open it wide."

"I will not try what I know impossible. It would be the part of a fool!"

"Which you have been playing all your life! Oh, you are hard to teach!"

Defiance reappeared on the face of the princess. She turned her back on Mara, saying, "I know what you have been tormenting me for! You have not succeeded, nor shall you succeed! You shall yet find me stronger than you think! I will yet be mistress of myself! I am still what I have always known myself--queen of Hell, and mistress of the worlds!"

Then came the most fearful thing of all. I did not know what it was; I knew myself unable to imagine it; I knew only that if it came near me I should die of terror! I now know that it was LIFE IN DEATH--life dead, yet existent; and I knew that Lilith had had glimpses, but only glimpses of it before: it had never been with her until now.

She stood as she had turned. Mara went and sat down by the fire. Fearing to stand alone with the princess, I went also and sat again by the hearth. Something began to depart from me. A sense of cold, yet not what we call cold, crept, not into, but out of my being, and pervaded it. The lamp of life and the eternal fire seemed dying together, and I about to be left with naught but the consciousness that I had been alive. Mercifully, bereavement did not go so far, and my thought went back to Lilith.

Something was taking place in her which we did not know. We knew we did not feel what she felt, but we knew we felt something of the misery it caused her. The thing itself was in her, not in us; its reflex, her misery, reached us, and was again reflected in us: she was in the outer darkness, we present with her who was in it! We were not in the outer darkness; had we been, we could not have been WITH her; we should have been timelessly, spacelessly, absolutely apart. The darkness knows neither the light nor itself; only the light knows itself and the darkness also. None but God hates evil and understands it.

Something was gone from her, which then first, by its absence, she knew to have been with her every moment of her wicked years. The source of life had withdrawn itself; all that was left her of conscious being was the dregs of her dead and corrupted life.

She stood rigid. Mara buried her head in her hands. I gazed on the face of one who knew existence but not love--knew nor life, nor joy, nor good; with my eyes I saw the face of a live death! She knew life only to know that it was dead, and that, in her, death lived. It was not merely that life had ceased in her, but that she was consciously a dead thing. She had killed her life, and was dead--and knew it. She must DEATH IT for ever and ever! She had tried her hardest to unmake herself, and could not! she was a dead life! she could not cease! she must BE! In her face I saw and read beyond its misery--saw in its dismay that the dismay behind it was more than it could manifest. It sent out a livid gloom; the light that was in her was darkness, and after its kind it shone. She was what God could not have created. She had usurped beyond her share in self-creation, and her part had undone His! She saw now what she had made, and behold, it was not good! She was as a conscious corpse, whose coffin would never come to pieces, never set her free! Her bodily eyes stood wide open, as if gazing into the heart of horror essential--her own indestructible evil. Her right hand also was now clenched--upon existent Nothing--her inheritance!

But with God all things are possible: He can save even the rich!

Without change of look, without sign of purpose, Lilith walked toward Mara. She felt her coming, and rose to meet her.

"I yield," said the princess. "I cannot hold out. I am defeated. --Not the less, I cannot open my hand."

"Have you tried?"

"I am trying now with all my might."

"I will take you to my father. You have wronged him worst of the created, therefore he best of the created can help you."

"How can HE help me?"

"He will forgive you."

"Ah, if he would but help me to cease! Not even that am I capable of! I have no power over myself; I am a slave! I acknowledge it. Let me die."

"A slave thou art that shall one day be a child!" answered Mara.--"Verily, thou shalt die, but not as thou thinkest. Thou shalt die out of death into life. Now is the Life for, that never was against thee!"

Like her mother, in whom lay the motherhood of all the world, Mara put her arms around Lilith, and kissed her on the forehead. The fiery-cold misery went out of her eyes, and their fountains filled. She lifted, and bore her to her own bed in a corner of the room, laid her softly upon it, and closed her eyes with caressing hands.

Lilith lay and wept. The Lady of Sorrow went to the door and opened it.

Morn, with the Spring in her arms, waited outside. Softly they stole in at the opened door, with a gentle wind in the skirts of their garments. It flowed and flowed about Lilith, rippling the unknown, upwaking sea of her life eternal; rippling and to ripple it, until at length she who had been but as a weed cast on the dry sandy shore to wither, should know herself an inlet of the everlasting ocean, henceforth to flow into her for ever, and ebb no more. She answered the morning wind with reviving breath, and began to listen. For in the skirts of the wind had come the rain--the soft rain that heals the mown, the many-wounded grass--soothing it with the sweetness of all music, the hush that lives between music and silence. It bedewed the desert places around the cottage, and the sands of Lilith's heart heard it, and drank it in. When Mara returned to sit by her bed, her tears were flowing softer than the rain, and soon she was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XL

THE HOUSE OF DEATH

The Mother of Sorrows rose, muffled her face, and went to call the Little Ones. They slept as if all the night they had not moved, but the moment she spoke they sprang to their feet, fresh as if new-made. Merrily down the stair they followed her, and she brought them where the princess lay, her tears yet flowing as she slept. Their glad faces grew grave. They looked from the princess out on the rain, then back at the princess.

"The sky is falling!" said one.

"The white juice is running out of the princess!" cried another, with an awed look.

"Is it rivers?" asked Odu, gazing at the little streams that flowed adown her hollow cheeks.

"Yes," answered Mara, "--the most wonderful of all rivers."

"I thought rivers was bigger, and rushed, like a lot of Little Ones, making loud noises!" he returned, looking at me, from whom alone he had heard of rivers.

"Look at the rivers of the sky!" said Mara. "See how they come down to wake up the waters under the earth! Soon will the rivers be flowing everywhere, merry and loud, like thousands and thousands of happy children. Oh, how glad they will make you, Little Ones! You have never seen any, and do not know how lovely is the water!"

"That will be the glad of the ground that the princess is grown good," said Odu. "See the glad of the sky!"

"Are the rivers the glad of the princess?" asked Luva. "They are not her juice, for they are not red!"

"They are the juice inside the juice," answered Mara.

Odu put one finger to his eye, looked at it, and shook his head.

I heard no more. Mother and daughter had gone away together through the dark. But we saw a light in the distance, and toward it we went stumbling over the moor.

Adam stood in the door, holding the candle to guide us, and talking with his wife, who, behind him, laid bread and wine on the table within.

"Happy children," I heard her say, "to have looked already on the face of my daughter! Surely it is the loveliest in the great world!"

When we reached the door, Adam welcomed us almost merrily. He set the candle on the threshold, and going to the elephants, would have taken the princess to carry her in; but she repulsed him, and pushing her elephants asunder, stood erect between them. They walked from beside her, and left her with him who had been her husband--ashamed indeed of her gaunt uncomeliness, but unsubmissive. He stood with a welcome in his eyes that shone through their severity.

"We have long waited for thee, Lilith!" he said.

She returned him no answer.

Eve and her daughter came to the door.

"The mortal foe of my children!" murmured Eve, standing radiant in her beauty.

"Your children are no longer in her danger," said Mara; "she has turned from evil."

"Trust her not hastily, Mara," answered her mother; "she has deceived a multitude!"

"But you will open to her the mirror of the Law of Liberty, mother, that she may go into it, and abide in it! She consents to open her hand and restore: will not the great Father restore her to inheritance with His other children?"

"I do not know Him!" murmured Lilith, in a voice of fear and doubt.

"Therefore it is that thou art miserable," said Adam.

"I will go back whence I came!" she cried, and turned, wringing her hands, to depart.

"That is indeed what I would have thee do, where I would have thee go--to Him from whom thou camest! In thy agony didst thou not cry out for Him?"

"I cried out for Death--to escape Him and thee!"

"Death is even now on his way to lead thee to Him. Thou knowest neither Death nor the Life that dwells in Death! Both befriend thee. I am dead, and would see thee dead, for I live and love thee. Thou art weary and heavy-laden: art thou not ashamed? Is not the being thou hast corrupted become to thee at length an evil thing? Wouldst thou yet live on in disgrace eternal? Cease thou canst not: wilt thou not be restored and BE?"

She stood silent with bowed head.

"Father," said Mara, "take her in thine arms, and carry her to her couch. There she will open her hand, and die into life."

"I will walk," said the princess.

Adam turned and led the way. The princess walked feebly after him into the cottage.

Then Eve came out to me where I sat with Lona in my bosom. She reached up her arms, took her from me, and carried her in. I dismounted, and the children also. The horse and the elephants stood shivering; Mara patted and stroked them every one; they lay down and fell asleep. She led us into the cottage, and gave the Little Ones of the bread and wine on the table. Adam and Lilith were standing there together, but silent both.

Eve came from the chamber of death, where she had laid Lona down, and offered of the bread and wine to the princess.

"Thy beauty slays me! It is death I would have, not food!" said Lilith, and turned from her.

"This food will help thee to die," answered Eve.

But Lilith would not taste of it.

"If thou wilt nor eat nor drink, Lilith," said Adam, "come and see the place where thou shalt lie in peace."

He led the way through the door of death, and she followed submissive. But when her foot crossed the threshold she drew it back, and pressed her hand to her bosom, struck through with the cold immortal.

A wild blast fell roaring on the roof, and died away in a moan. She stood ghastly with terror.

"It is he!" said her voiceless lips: I read their motion.

The darkness, the cold, the silence, the still air, the faces of the lovely dead, made the hearts of the children beat softly, but their little tongues would talk--with low, hushed voices.

"What a curious place to sleep in!" said one, "I would rather be in my nest!" "It is SO cold!" said another.

"Yes, it is cold," answered our host; "but you will not be cold in your sleep."

"Where are our nests?" asked more than one, looking round and seeing no couch unoccupied.

"Find places, and sleep where you choose," replied Adam.

Instantly they scattered, advancing fearlessly beyond the light, but we still heard their gentle voices, and it was plain they saw where I could not.

"Oh," cried one, "here is such a beautiful lady!--may I sleep beside her? I will creep in quietly, and not wake her."

"Yes, you may," answered the voice of Eve behind us; and we came to the couch while the little fellow was yet creeping slowly and softly under the sheet. He laid his head beside the lady's, looked up at us, and was still. His eyelids fell; he was asleep.

We went a little farther, and there was another who had climbed up on the couch of a woman.

"Mother! mother!" he cried, kneeling over her, his face close to hers. "--She's so cold she can't speak," he said, looking up to us; "but I will soon make her warm!"

He lay down, and pressing close to her, put his little arm over her. In an instant he too was asleep, smiling an absolute content.

We came to a third Little One; it was Luva. She stood on tiptoe, leaning over the edge of a couch.

"My own mother wouldn't have me," she said softly: "will you?"

Receiving no reply, she looked up at Eve. The great mother lifted her to the couch, and she got at once under the snowy covering.

Each of the Little Ones had by this time, except three of the boys, found at least an unobjecting bedfellow, and lay still and white beside a still, white woman. The little orphans had adopted mothers! One tiny girl had chosen a father to sleep with, and that was mine. A boy lay by

In a few minutes Adam returned with an ancient weapon in his hand. The scabbard looked like vellum grown dark with years, but the hilt shone like gold that nothing could tarnish. He drew out the blade. It flashed like a pale blue northern streamer, and the light of it made the princess open her eyes. She saw the sword, shuddered, and held out her hand. Adam took it. The sword gleamed once, there was one little gush of blood, and he laid the severed hand in Mara's lap. Lilith had given one moan, and was already fast asleep. Mara covered the arm with the sheet, and the three turned away.

"Will you not dress the wound?" I said.

"A wound from that sword," answered Adam, "needs no dressing. It is healing and not hurt."

"Poor lady!" I said, "she will wake with but one hand!"

"Where the dead deformity clung," replied Mara, "the true, lovely hand is already growing."

We heard a childish voice behind us, and turned again. The candle in Eve's hand shone on the sleeping face of Lilith, and the waking faces of the three Little Ones, grouped on the other side of her couch. "How beautiful she is grown!" said one of them.

"Poor princess!" said another; "I will sleep with her. She will not bite any more!"

As he spoke he climbed into her bed, and was immediately fast asleep. Eve covered him with the sheet.

"I will go on her other side," said the third. "She shall have two to kiss her when she wakes!"

"And I am left alone!" said the first mournfully.

"I will put you to bed," said Eve.

She gave the candle to her husband, and led the child away.

We turned once more to go back to the cottage. I was very sad, for no one had offered me a place in the house of the dead. Eve joined us as we went, and walked on before with her husband. Mara by my side carried the hand of Lilith in the lap of her robe.

"Ah, you have found her!" we heard Eve say as we stepped into the cottage.

The door stood open; two elephant-trunks came through it out of the night beyond.

"I sent them with the lantern," she went on to her husband, "to look for Mara's leopardess: they have brought her."

I followed Adam to the door, and between us we took the white creature from the elephants, and carried her to the chamber we had just left, the women preceding us, Eve with the light, and Mara still carrying the hand. There we laid the beauty across the feet of the princess, her fore-paws outstretched, and her head couching between them.

I had almost reached the other side when a Shadow--I think it was The Shadow, barred my way. He seemed to have a helmet upon his head, but as I drew closer I perceived it was the head itself I saw--so distorted as to bear but a doubtful resemblance to the human. A cold wind smote me, dank and sickening--repulsive as the air of a charnel-house; firmness forsook my joints, and my limbs trembled as if they would drop in a helpless heap. I seemed to pass through him, but I think now that he passed through me: for a moment I was as one of the damned. Then a soft wind like the first breath of a new-born spring greeted me, and before me arose the dawn.

My way now led me past the door of Mara's cottage. It stood wide open, and upon the table I saw a loaf of bread and a pitcher of water. In or around the cottage was neither howl nor wail.

I came to the precipice that testified to the vanished river. I climbed its worn face, and went on into the desert. There at last, after much listening to and fro, I determined the spot where the hidden water was loudest, hung Lilith's hand about my neck, and began to dig. It was a long labour, for I had to make a large hole because of the looseness of the sand; but at length I threw up a damp spadeful. I flung the sexton-tool on the verge, and laid down the hand. A little water was already oozing from under its fingers. I sprang out, and made haste to fill the grave. Then, utterly fatigued, I dropped beside it, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XLII

I SLEEP THE SLEEP

When I woke, the ground was moist about me, and my track to the grave was growing a quicksand. In its ancient course the river was swelling, and had begun to shove at its burden. Soon it would be roaring down the precipice, and, divided in its fall, rushing with one branch to resubmerge the orchard valley, with the other to drown perhaps the monster horde, and between them to isle the Evil Wood. I set out at once on my return to those who sent me.

When I came to the precipice, I took my way betwixt the branches, for I would pass again by the cottage of Mara, lest she should have returned: I longed to see her once more ere I went to sleep; and now I knew where to cross the channels, even if the river should have overtaken me and filled them. But when I reached it, the door stood open still; the bread and the water were still on the table; and deep silence was within and around it. I stopped and called aloud at the door, but no voice replied, and I went my way.

A little farther, I came where sat a grayheaded man on the sand, weeping.

"What ails you, sir?" I asked. "Are you forsaken?"

"I weep," he answered, "because they will not let me die. I have been to the house of death, and its mistress, notwithstanding my years, refuses me. Intercede for me, sir, if you know her, I pray you."

"Nay, sir," I replied, "that I cannot; for she refuses none whom it is lawful for her to receive."

"How know you this of her? You have never sought death! you are much too young to desire it!"

"I fear your words may indicate that, were you young again, neither would you desire it."

"Indeed, young sir, I would not! and certain I am that you cannot."

did not speak! they were with me now, and soon, soon I should be with them!

I dropped Adam's old spade, and the dull sound of its fall on the clay floor seemed reverberated from the chamber beyond: a childish terror seized me; I sat and stared at the coffin-door.--But father Adam, mother Eve, sister Mara would soon come to me, and then-- welcome the cold world and the white neighbours! I forgot my fears, lived a little, and loved my dead.

Something did move in the chamber of the dead! There came from it what was LIKE a dim, far-off sound, yet was not what I knew as sound. My soul sprang into my ears. Was it a mere thrill of the dead air, too slight to be heard, but quivering in every spiritual sense? I KNEW without hearing, without feeling it!

The something was coming! it drew nearer! In the bosom of my desertion awoke an infant hope. The noiseless thrill reached the coffin-door--became sound, and smote on my ear.

The door began to move--with a low, soft creaking of its hinges. It was opening! I ceased to listen, and stared expectant.

It opened a little way, and a face came into the opening. It was Lona's. Its eyes were closed, but the face itself was upon me, and seemed to see me. It was white as Eve's, white as Mara's, but did not shine like their faces. She spoke, and her voice was like a sleepy night-wind in the grass.

"Are you coming, king?" it said. "I cannot rest until you are with me, gliding down the river to the great sea, and the beautiful dream-land. The sleepiness is full of lovely things: come and see them."

"Ah, my darling!" I cried. "Had I but known!--I thought you were dead!"

She lay on my bosom--cold as ice frozen to marble. She threw her arms, so white, feebly about me, and sighed--

"Carry me back to my bed, king. I want to sleep."

I bore her to the death-chamber, holding her tight lest she should dissolve out of my arms. Unaware that I saw, I carried her straight to her couch.

"Lay me down," she said, "and cover me from the warm air; it hurts--a little. Your bed is there, next to mine. I shall see you when I wake."

She was already asleep. I threw myself on my couch--blessed as never was man on the eve of his wedding.

"There is no need: we will serve you here," he answered. "--You do not feel cold, do you?"

"Not too cold to lie still, but perhaps too cold to eat!"

He came to the side of my couch, bent over me, and breathed on my heart. At once I was warm.

As he left me, I heard a voice, and knew it was the Mother's. She was singing, and her song was sweet and soft and low, and I thought she sat by my bed in the dark; but ere it ceased, her song soared aloft, and seemed to come from the throat of a woman-angel, high above all the region of larks, higher than man had ever yet lifted up his heart. I heard every word she sang, but could keep only this:--

"Many a wrong, and its curing song; Many a road, and many
an inn; Room to roam, but only one home For all the world to
win!"

and I thought I had heard the song before.

Then the three came to my couch together, bringing me bread and wine, and I sat up to partake of it. Adam stood on one side of me, Eve and Mara on the other.

"You are good indeed, father Adam, mother Eve, sister Mara," I said, "to receive me! In my soul I am ashamed and sorry!"

"We knew you would come again!" answered Eve.

"How could you know it?" I returned.

"Because here was I, born to look after my brothers and sisters!" answered Mara with a smile.

"Every creature must one night yield himself and lie down," answered Adam: "he was made for liberty, and must not be left a slave!"

"It will be late, I fear, ere all have lain down!" I said.

"There is no early or late here," he rejoined. "For him the true time then first begins who lays himself down. Men are not coming home fast; women are coming faster. A desert, wide and dreary, parts him who lies down to die from him who lies down to live. The former may well make haste, but here is no haste."

"To our eyes," said Eve, "you were coming all the time: we knew Mara would find you, and you must come!"

"How long is it since my father lay down?" I asked.

"I have told you that years are of no consequence in this house," answered Adam; "we do not heed them. Your father will wake when his morning comes. Your mother, next to whom you are lying,----"

"Ah, then, it IS my mother!" I exclaimed.

"Yes--she with the wounded hand," he assented; "--she will be up and away long ere your morning is ripe."

"I am sorry."

"Rather be glad."

"It must be a sight for God Himself to see such a woman come awake!"

"It is indeed a sight for God, a sight that makes her Maker glad! He sees of the travail of His soul, and is satisfied!--Look at her once more, and sleep."

He let the rays of his candle fall on her beautiful face.

"She looks much younger!" I said.

"She IS much younger," he replied. "Even Lilith already begins to look younger!"

I lay down, blissfully drowsy.

"But when you see your mother again," he continued, "you will not at first know her. She will go on steadily growing younger until she reaches the perfection of her womanhood--a splendour beyond foresight. Then she will open her eyes, behold on one side her husband, on the other her son--and rise and leave them to go to a father and a brother more to her than they."

I heard as one in a dream. I was very cold, but already the cold caused me no suffering. I felt them put on me the white garment of the dead. Then I forgot everything. The night about me was pale with sleeping faces, but I was asleep also, nor knew that I slept.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE DREAMS THAT CAME

I grew aware of existence, aware also of the profound, the infinite cold. I was intensely blessed--more blessed, I know, than my heart, imagining, can now recall. I could not think of warmth with the least suggestion of pleasure. I knew that I had enjoyed it, but could not remember how. The cold had soothed every care, dissolved every pain, comforted every sorrow. COMFORTED? Nay; sorrow was swallowed up in the life drawing nigh to restore every good and lovely thing a hundredfold! I lay at peace, full of the quietest expectation, breathing the damp odours of Earth's bountiful bosom, aware of the souls of primroses, daisies and snowdrops, patiently waiting in it for the Spring.

How convey the delight of that frozen, yet conscious sleep! I had no more to stand up! had only to lie stretched out and still! How cold I was, words cannot tell; yet I grew colder and colder--and welcomed the cold yet more and more. I grew continuously less conscious of myself, continuously more conscious of bliss, unimaginable yet felt. I had neither made it nor prayed for it: it was mine in virtue of existence! and existence was mine in virtue of a Will that dwelt in mine.

Then the dreams began to arrive--and came crowding.--I lay naked on a snowy peak. The white mist heaved below me like a billowy sea. The cold moon was in the air with me, and above the moon and me the colder sky, in which the moon and I dwelt. I was Adam, waiting for God to breathe into my nostrils the breath of life.--I was not Adam, but a child in the bosom of a mother white with a radiant whiteness. I was a youth on a white horse, leaping from cloud to cloud of a blue heaven, hasting calmly to some blessed goal. For centuries I dreamed--or was it chiliads? or only one long night?--But why ask? for time had nothing to do with me; I was in the land of thought--farther in, higher up than the seven dimensions, the ten senses: I think I was where I am--in the heart of God.--I dreamed away dim cycles in the centre of a melting glacier, the spectral moon drawing nearer and nearer, the wind and the welter of a torrent growing in my ears. I lay and heard them: the wind and the water and the moon sang a peaceful waiting for a redemption drawing nigh. I dreamed cycles, I say, but, for aught I knew or can tell, they were the solemn, æonian march of a second, pregnant with eternity.

Then, of a sudden, but not once troubling my conscious bliss, all the wrongs I had ever done, from far beyond my earthly memory down to the present moment, were with me. Fully in every wrong lived the conscious I, confessing, abjuring, lamenting the dead, making atonement with each person I had injured, hurt, or offended. Every human soul to which I had caused a troubled thought, was now grown unspeakably dear to me, and I humbled myself before it, agonising to cast from between us the clinging offence. I wept at the feet of the mother whose commands I had slighted; with bitter shame I confessed to my father that I had told him two lies, and long forgotten them: now for long had remembered them, and kept them in memory to crush at last at his feet. I was the eager slave of all whom I had thus or anyhow wronged. Countless services I devised to render them! For this one I would build such a house as had never grown from the ground! for that one I would train such horses as had never yet been seen in any world! For a third I would make such a garden as had never bloomed, haunted with still pools, and alive with running waters! I would write songs to make their hearts swell, and tales to make them glow! I would turn the forces of the world into such channels of invention as to make them laugh with the joy of wonder! Love possessed me! Love was my life! Love was to me, as to him that made me, all in all!

Suddenly I found myself in a solid blackness, upon which the ghost of light that dwells in the caverns of the eyes could not cast one fancied glimmer. But my heart, which feared nothing and hoped infinitely, was full of peace. I lay imagining what the light would be when it came, and what new creation it would bring with it--when, suddenly, without conscious volition, I sat up and stared about me.

The moon was looking in at the lowest, horizontal, crypt-like windows of the death-chamber, her long light slanting, I thought, across the fallen, but still ripening sheaves of the harvest of the great husbandman.--But no; that harvest was gone! Gathered in, or swept away by chaotic storm, not a sacred sheaf was there! My dead were gone! I was alone!--In desolation dread lay depths yet deeper than I had hitherto known!--Had there never been any ripening dead? Had I but dreamed them and their loveliness? Why then these walls? why the empty couches? No; they were all up! they were all abroad in the new eternal day, and had forgotten me! They had left me behind, and alone! Tenfold more terrible was the tomb its inhabitants away! The quiet ones had made me quiet with their presence--had pervaded my mind with their blissful peace; now I had no friend, and my lovers were far from me! A moment I sat and stared horror-stricken. I had been alone with the moon on a mountain top in the sky; now I was alone with her in a huge cenotaph: she too was staring about, seeking her dead with ghastly gaze! I sprang to my feet, and staggered from the fearful place.

The cottage was empty. I ran out into the night.

No moon was there! Even as I left the chamber, a cloudy rampart had risen and covered her. But a broad shimmer came from far over the heath, mingled with a ghostly murmuring music, as if the moon were raining a light that plashed as it fell. I ran stumbling across the moor, and found a lovely lake, margined with reeds and rushes: the moon behind the cloud was gazing upon the monsters' den, full of clearest, brightest water, and very still.--But the musical murmur went on, filling the quiet air, and drawing me after it.

I walked round the border of the little mere, and climbed the range of hills. What a sight rose to my eyes! The whole expanse where, with hot, aching feet, I had crossed and recrossed the deep-scored channels and ravines of the dry river-bed, was alive with streams, with torrents, with still pools--"a river deep and wide"! How the moon flashed on the water! how the water answered the moon with flashes of its own--white flashes breaking everywhere from its rock-encountered flow! And a great jubilant song arose from its bosom, the song of new-born liberty. I stood a moment gazing, and my heart also began to exult: my life was not all a failure! I had helped to set this river free!--My dead were not lost! I had but to go after and find them! I would follow and follow until I came whither they had gone! Our meeting might be thousands of years away, but at last--AT LAST I should hold them! Wherefore else did the floods clap their hands?

I hurried down the hill: my pilgrimage was begun! In what direction to turn my steps I knew not, but I must go and go till I found my living dead! A torrent ran swift and wide at the foot of the range: I rushed in, it laid no hold upon me; I waded through it. The next I sprang across; the third I swam; the next I waded again.

I stopped to gaze on the wondrous loveliness of the ceaseless flash and flow, and to hearken to the multitudinous broken music. Every now and then some incipient air would seem about to draw itself clear of the dulcet confusion, only to merge again in the consorted roar. At moments the world of waters would invade as if to overwhelm me--not with the force of its seaward rush, or the shouting of its liberated throng, but with the greatness of the silence wandering into sound.

As I stood lost in delight, a hand was laid on my shoulder. I turned, and saw a man in the prime of strength, beautiful as if fresh from the heart of the glad creator, young like him who cannot grow old. I looked: it was Adam. He stood large and grand, clothed in a white robe, with the moon in his hair.

"Father," I cried, "where is she? Where are the dead? Is the great resurrection come and gone? The terror of my loneliness was upon me; I could not sleep without my dead; I ran from the desolate chamber. --Whither shall I go to find them?"

"You mistake, my son," he answered, in a voice whose very breath was consolation. "You are still in the chamber of death, still upon your couch, asleep and dreaming, with the dead around you."

"Alas! when I but dream how am I to know it? The dream best dreamed is the likest to the waking truth!"

"When you are quite dead, you will dream no false dream. The soul that is true can generate nothing that is not true, neither can the false enter it."

"But, sir," I faltered, "how am I to distinguish betwixt the true and the false where both alike seem real?"

"Do you not understand?" he returned, with a smile that might have slain all the sorrows of all his children. "You CANNOT perfectly distinguish between the true and the false while you are not yet quite dead; neither indeed will you when you are quite dead--that is, quite alive, for then the false will never present itself. At this moment, believe me, you are on your bed in the house of death."

"I am trying hard to believe you, father. I do indeed believe you, although I can neither see nor feel the truth of what you say."

"You are not to blame that you cannot. And because even in a dream you believe me, I will help you.--Put forth your left hand open, and close it gently: it will clasp the hand of your Lona, who lies asleep where you lie dreaming you are awake."

I put forth my hand: it closed on the hand of Lona, firm and soft and deathless.

"But, father," I cried, "she is warm!"

"Your hand is as warm to hers. Cold is a thing unknown in our country. Neither she nor you are yet in the fields of home, but each to each is alive and warm and healthful."

Then my heart was glad. But immediately supervened a sharp-stinging doubt.

"Father," I said, "forgive me, but how am I to know surely that this also is not a part of the lovely dream in which I am now walking with thyself?"

"Thou doubtest because thou lovest the truth. Some would willingly believe life but a phantasm, if only it might for ever afford them a world of pleasant dreams: thou art not of such! Be content for a while not to know surely. The hour will come, and that ere long, when, being true, thou shalt behold the very truth, and doubt will be for ever dead.

Scarce, then, wilt thou be able to recall the features of the phantom. Thou wilt then know that which thou canst not now dream. Thou hast not yet looked the Truth in the face, hast as yet at best but seen him through a cloud. That which thou seest not, and never didst see save in a glass darkly--that which, indeed, never can be known save by its innate splendour shining straight into pure eyes--that thou canst not but doubt, and art blameless in doubting until thou seest it face to face, when thou wilt no longer be able to doubt it. But to him who has once seen even a shadow only of the truth, and, even but hoping he has seen it when it is present no longer, tries to obey it--to him the real vision, the Truth himself, will come, and depart no more, but abide with him for ever."

"I think I see, father," I said; "I think I understand."

"Then remember, and recall. Trials yet await thee, heavy, of a nature thou knowest not now. Remember the things thou hast seen. Truly thou knowest not those things, but thou knowest what they have seemed, what they have meant to thee! Remember also the things thou shalt yet see. Truth is all in all; and the truth of things lies, at once hid and revealed, in their seeming."

"How can that be, father?" I said, and raised my eyes with the question; for I had been listening with downbent head, aware of nothing but the voice of Adam.

He was gone; in my ears was nought but the sounding silence of the swift-flowing waters. I stretched forth my hands to find him, but no answering touch met their seeking. I was alone--alone in the land of dreams! To myself I seemed wide awake, but I believed I was in a dream, because he had told me so.

Even in a dream, however, the dreamer must do something! he cannot sit down and refuse to stir until the dream grow weary of him and depart: I took up my wandering, and went on.

Many channels I crossed, and came to a wider space of rock; there, dreaming I was weary, I laid myself down, and longed to be awake.

I was about to rise and resume my journey, when I discovered that I lay beside a pit in the rock, whose mouth was like that of a grave. It was deep and dark; I could see no bottom.

Now in the dreams of my childhood I had found that a fall invariably woke me, and would, therefore, when desiring to discontinue a dream, seek some eminence whence to cast myself down that I might wake: with one glance at the peaceful heavens, and one at the rushing waters, I rolled myself over the edge of the pit.

That night I lay awake from down-lying to uprising, and the next day renewed my endeavours with the mystic door. But all was yet in vain. How the hours went I cannot think. No one came nigh me; not a sound from the house below entered my ears. Not once did I feel weary--only desolate, drearily desolate.

I passed a second sleepless night. In the morning I went for the last time to the chamber in the roof, and for the last time sought an open door: there was none. My heart died within me. I had lost my Lona!

Was she anywhere? had she ever been, save in the mouldering cells of my brain? "I must die one day," I thought, "and then, straight from my death-bed, I will set out to find her! If she is not, I will go to the Father and say--`Even thou canst not help me: let me cease, I pray thee!'"

CHAPTER XLIV

THE WAKING

The fourth night I seemed to fall asleep, and that night woke indeed. I opened my eyes and knew, although all was dark around me, that I lay in the house of death, and that every moment since there I fell asleep I had been dreaming, and now first was awake. "At last!" I said to my heart, and it leaped for joy. I turned my eyes; Lona stood by my couch, waiting for me! I had never lost her!--only for a little time lost the sight of her! Truly I needed not have lamented her so sorely!

It was dark, as I say, but I saw her: SHE was not dark! Her eyes shone with the radiance of the Mother's, and the same light issued from her face--nor from her face only, for her death-dress, filled with the light of her body now tenfold awake in the power of its resurrection, was white as snow and glistering. She fell asleep a girl; she awoke a woman, ripe with the loveliness of the life essential. I folded her in my arms, and knew that I lived indeed.

"I woke first!" she said, with a wondering smile.

"You did, my love, and woke me!"

"I only looked at you and waited," she answered.

The candle came floating toward us through the dark, and in a few moments Adam and Eve and Mara were with us. They greeted us with a quiet good-morning and a smile: they were used to such wakings!

"I hope you have had a pleasant darkness!" said the Mother.

"Not very," I answered, "but the waking from it is heavenly."

"It is but begun," she rejoined; "you are hardly yet awake!"

"He is at least clothed-upon with Death, which is the radiant garment of Life," said Adam.

"The Shadow is hovering," replied Adam: "there is one here whom he counts his own! But ours once, never more can she be his!"

I turned to look on the faces of my father and mother, and kiss them ere we went: their couches were empty save of the Little Ones who had with love's boldness appropriated their hospitality! For an instant that awful dream of desolation overshadowed me, and I turned aside.

"What is it, my heart?" said Lona.

"Their empty places frightened me," I answered.

"They are up and away long ago," said Adam. "They kissed you ere they went, and whispered, `Come soon.'"

"And I neither to feel nor hear them!" I murmured.

"How could you--far away in your dreary old house! You thought the dreadful place had you once more! Now go and find them.--Your parents, my child," he added, turning to Lona, "must come and find you!"

The hour of our departure was at hand. Lona went to the couch of the mother who had slain her, and kissed her tenderly--then laid herself in her father's arms.

"That kiss will draw her homeward, my Lona!" said Adam.

"Who were her parents?" asked Lona.

"My father," answered Adam, "is her father also."

She turned and laid her hand in mine.

I kneeled and humbly thanked the three for helping me to die. Lona knelt beside me, and they all breathed upon us.

"Hark! I hear the sun," said Adam.

I listened: he was coming with the rush as of a thousand times ten thousand far-off wings, with the roar of a molten and flaming world millions upon millions of miles away. His approach was a crescendo chord of a hundred harmonies.

The three looked at each other and smiled, and that smile went floating heavenward a three-petaled flower, the family's morning thanksgiving. From their mouths and their faces it spread over their bodies and shone through their garments. Ere I could say, "Lo, they change!" Adam and Eve stood before me the angels of the resurrection, and Mara was the Magdalene with them at the sepulchre. The countenance of Adam was like lightning, and Eve held a napkin that flung flakes of splendour about the place.

A wind began to moan in pulsing gusts.

"You hear his wings now!" said Adam; and I knew he did not mean the wings of the morning.

"It is the great Shadow stirring to depart," he went on. "Wretched creature, he has himself within him, and cannot rest!"

"But is there not in him something deeper yet?" I asked.

"Without a substance," he answered, "a shadow cannot be--yea, or without a light behind the substance!"

He listened for a moment, then called out, with a glad smile, "Hark to the golden cock! Silent and motionless for millions of years has he stood on the clock of the universe; now at last he is flapping his wings! now will he begin to crow! and at intervals will men hear him until the dawn of the day eternal."

I listened. Far away--as in the heart of an æonian silence, I heard the clear jubilant outcry of the golden throat. It hurled defiance at death and the dark; sang infinite hope, and coming calm. It was the "expectation of the creature" finding at last a voice; the cry of a chaos that would be a kingdom!

Then I heard a great flapping.

"The black bat is flown!" said Mara.

"Amen, golden cock, bird of God!" cried Adam, and the words rang through the house of silence, and went up into the airy regions.

At his AMEN--like doves arising on wings of silver from among the potsherds, up sprang the Little Ones to their knees on their beds, calling aloud,

"Crow! crow again, golden cock!"--as if they had both seen and heard him in their dreams.

Then each turned and looked at the sleeping bedfellow, gazed a moment with loving eyes, kissed the silent companion of the night, and sprang from the couch. The Little Ones who had lain down beside my father and mother gazed blank and sad for a moment at their empty places, then slid slowly to the floor. There they fell each into the other's arms, as if then first, each by the other's eyes, assured they were alive and awake. Suddenly spying Lona, they came running, radiant with bliss, to embrace her. Odu, catching sight of the leopardess on the feet of the princess, bounded to her next, and throwing an arm over the great sleeping head, fondled and kissed it.

"Wake up, wake up, darling!" he cried; "it is time to wake!"

The leopardess did not move.

"She has slept herself cold!" he said to Mara, with an upcast look of appealing consternation.

"She is waiting for the princess to wake, my child," said Mara.

Odu looked at the princess, and saw beside her, still asleep, two of his companions. He flew at them.

"Wake up! wake up!" he cried, and pushed and pulled, now this one, now that.

But soon he began to look troubled, and turned to me with misty eyes.

"They will not wake!" he said. "And why are they so cold?"

"They too are waiting for the princess," I answered.

He stretched across, and laid his hand on her face.

"She is cold too! What is it?" he cried--and looked round in wondering dismay.

Adam went to him.

"Her wake is not ripe yet," he said: "she is busy forgetting. When she has forgotten enough to remember enough, then she will soon be ripe, and wake."

"And remember?"

"Yes--but not too much at once though."

"But the golden cock has crown!" argued the child, and fell again upon his companions.

"Peter! Peter! Crispy!" he cried. "Wake up, Peter! wake up, Crispy! We are all awake but you two! The gold cock has crown SO loud! The sun is awake and coming! Oh, why WON'T you wake?"

But Peter would not wake, neither would Crispy, and Odu wept outright at last.

CHAPTER XLV

THE JOURNEY HOME

It had ceased to be dark; we walked in a dim twilight, breathing through the dimness the breath of the spring. A wondrous change had passed upon the world--or was it not rather that a change more marvellous had taken place in us? Without light enough in the sky or the air to reveal anything, every heather-bush, every small shrub, every blade of grass was perfectly visible--either by light that went out from it, as fire from the bush Moses saw in the desert, or by light that went out of our eyes. Nothing cast a shadow; all things interchanged a little light. Every growing thing showed me, by its shape and colour, its indwelling idea--the informing thought, that is, which was its being, and sent it out. My bare feet seemed to love every plant they trod upon. The world and my being, its life and mine, were one. The microcosm and macrocosm were at length atoned, at length in harmony! I lived in everything; everything entered and lived in me. To be aware of a thing, was to know its life at once and mine, to know whence we came, and where we were at home--was to know that we are all what we are, because Another is what he is! Sense after sense, hitherto asleep, awoke in me--sense after sense indescribable, because no correspondent words, no likenesses or imaginations exist, wherewithal to describe them. Full indeed--yet ever expanding, ever making room to receive--was the conscious being where things kept entering by so many open doors! When a little breeze brushing a bush of heather set its purple bells a ringing, I was myself in the joy of the bells, myself in the joy of the breeze to which responded their sweet TIN-TINNING[2], myself in the joy of the sense, and of the soul that received all the joys together. To everything glad I lent the hall of my being wherein to revel. I was a peaceful ocean upon which the ground-swell of a living joy was continually lifting new waves; yet was the joy ever the same joy, the eternal joy, with tens of thousands of changing forms. Life was a cosmic holiday.

Now I knew that life and truth were one; that life mere and pure is in itself bliss; that where being is not bliss, it is not life, but life-in-death. Every inspiration of the dark wind that blew where it listed, went out a sigh of thanksgiving. At last I was! I lived, and nothing could touch my more like itself, that is, more ideal, than ever man that had not died found summer-day in any world. I walked on the new earth, under the new heaven, and found them the same as the old, save that now they opened their minds to me, and I saw into them. Now, the soul of everything I met came out to greet me and make friends with me, telling me we came from the same, and meant the same. I was going to him, they said, with whom they always were, and whom they always meant; they were, they said, lightnings that took shape as they flashed from him to his. The dark rocks drank like sponges the rays that showered upon them; the great world soaked up the light, and sent out the living. Two joy-fires were Lona and I. Earth breathed heavenward her sweet-savoured smoke; we breathed homeward our longing desires. For thanksgiving, our very consciousness was that.

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[2] Tin tin sonando con sì dolce nota Che 'l ben disposto spirito d' amor turge. DEL PARADISO, x. 142.

We came to the channels, once so dry and wearyful: they ran and flashed and foamed with living water that shouted in its gladness! Far as the eye could see, all was a rushing, roaring, dashing river of water made vocal by its rocks.

We did not cross it, but "walked in glory and in joy" up its right bank, until we reached the great cataract at the foot of the sandy desert, where, roaring and swirling and dropping sheer, the river divided into its two branches. There we climbed the height--and found no desert: through grassy plains, between grassy banks, flowed the deep, wide, silent river full to the brim. Then first to the Little Ones was revealed the glory of God in the limpid flow of water. Instinctively they plunged and swam, and the beasts followed them.

The desert rejoiced and blossomed as the rose. Wide forests had sprung up, their whole undergrowth flowering shrubs peopled with song-birds. Every thicket gave birth to a rivulet, and every rivulet to its water-song.

The place of the buried hand gave no sign. Beyond and still beyond, the river came in full volume from afar. Up and up we went, now along grassy margin, and now through forest of gracious trees. The grass grew sweeter and its flowers more lovely and various as we went; the trees grew larger, and the wind fuller of messages.

We came at length to a forest whose trees were greater, grander, and more beautiful than any we had yet seen. Their live pillars upheaved a thick embowed roof, betwixt whose leaves and blossoms hardly a sunbeam filtered. Into the rafters of this aerial vault the children climbed, and through them went scrambling and leaping in a land of bloom, shouting to the unseen elephants below, and hearing them trumpet their replies. The conversations between them Lona understood while I but guessed at them blunderingly. The Little Ones chased the squirrels, and the squirrels, frolicking, drew them on--always at length allowing themselves to be caught and petted. Often would some bird, lovely in plumage and form, light upon one of them, sing a cloudiness from the rain, not even a tinge of yellow or brown; the delicate mass shone with the pale berylline gleam that ascended from its deep, dainty bed.

Drawing nearer to the mountain, we saw that the river came from its very peak, and rushed in full volume through the main street of the city. It descended to the gate by a stair of deep and wide steps, mingled of porphyry and serpentine, which continued to the foot of the mountain. There arriving we found shallower steps on both banks, leading up to the gate, and along the ascending street. Without the briefest halt, the Little Ones ran straight up the stair to the gate, which stood open.

Outside, on the landing, sat the portress, a woman-angel of dark visage, leaning her shadowed brow on her idle hand. The children rushed upon her, covering her with caresses, and ere she understood, they had taken heaven by surprise, and were already in the city, still mounting the stair by the side of the descending torrent. A great angel, attended by a company of shining ones, came down to meet and receive them, but merrily evading them all, up still they ran. In merry dance, however, a group of woman-angels descended upon them, and in a moment they were fettered in heavenly arms. The radiants carried them away, and I saw them no more.

"Ah!" said the mighty angel, continuing his descent to meet us who

[redacted]

saw, not the intent alone, but the intender too; not the idea alone, but the imbodier present, the operant outsender: nothing in this kingdom was dead; nothing was mere; nothing only a thing.

We went up through the city and passed out. There was no wall on the upper side, but a huge pile of broken rocks, upsloping like the moraine of an eternal glacier; and through the openings between the rocks, the river came billowing out. On their top I could dimly discern what seemed three or four great steps of a stair, disappearing in a cloud white as snow; and above the steps I saw, but with my mind's eye only, as it were a grand old chair, the throne of the Ancient of Days. Over and under and between those steps issued, plenteously, unceasingly new-born, the river of the water of life.

The great angel could guide us no farther: those rocks we must ascend alone!

My heart beating with hope and desire, I held faster the hand of my Lona, and we began to climb; but soon we let each other go, to use hands as well as feet in the toilsome ascent of the huge stones. At length we drew near the cloud, which hung down the steps like the borders of a garment, passed through the fringe, and entered the deep folds. A hand, warm and strong, laid hold of mine, and drew me to a little door with a golden lock. The door opened; the hand let mine go, and pushed me gently through. I turned quickly, and saw the board of a large book in the act of closing behind me. I stood alone in my library.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE "ENDLESS ENDING"

As yet I have not found Lona, but Mara is much with me. She has taught me many things, and is teaching me more.

Can it be that that last waking also was in the dream? that I am still in the chamber of death, asleep and dreaming, not yet ripe enough to wake? Or can it be that I did not go to sleep outright and heartily, and so have come awake too soon? If that waking was itself but a dream, surely it was a dream of a better waking yet to come, and I have not been the sport of a false vision! Such a dream must have yet lovelier truth at the heart of its dreaming!

In moments of doubt I cry,

"Could God Himself create such lovely things as I dreamed?"

"Whence then came thy dream?" answers Hope.

"Out of my dark self, into the light of my consciousness."

"But whence first into thy dark self?" rejoins Hope.

"My brain was its mother, and the fever in my blood its father."

"Say rather," suggests Hope, "thy brain was the violin whence it issued, and the fever in thy blood the bow that drew it forth.--But who made the violin? and who guided the bow across its strings? Say rather, again--who set the song birds each on its bough in the tree of life, and startled each in its order from its perch? Whence came the fantasia? and whence the life that danced thereto? Didst THOU say, in the dark of thy own unconscious self, `Let beauty be; let truth seem!' and straightway beauty was, and truth but seemed?"

Man dreams and desires; God broods and wills and quickens.

When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfil it.

I have never again sought the mirror. The hand sent me back: I will not go out again by that door! "All the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come."

Now and then, when I look round on my books, they seem to waver as if a wind rippled their solid mass, and another world were about to break through. Sometimes when I am abroad, a like thing takes place; the heavens and the earth, the trees and the grass appear for a moment to shake as if about to pass away; then, lo, they have settled again into the old familiar face! At times I seem to hear whisperings around me, as if some that loved me were talking of me; but when I would distinguish the words, they cease, and all is very still. I know not whether these things rise in my brain, or enter it from without. I do not seek them; they come, and I let them go.

Strange dim memories, which will not abide identification, often, through misty windows of the past, look out upon me in the broad daylight, but I never dream now. It may be, notwithstanding, that, when most awake, I am only dreaming the more! But when I wake at last into that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more.

I wait; asleep or awake, I wait.

Novalis says, "Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one."